The Kingdom of Alwa

by

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Editor's Preface

THIS WORK, ORIGINALLY submitted for an M.A. degree at the University of Calgary, has been edited and slightly shortened for publication.

Readers should be aware that further excavations have been undertaken at the site of Soba since this work was completed and the first volume of the reports has now been published as: D.A. Welsby and C.M. Daniels, *Soba: archaeological research at a medieval capital on the Blue Nile*, Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 1991. The results of this new work, though spectacular and showing a number of large religious and possibly lay buildings, does not seriously affect the main argument of Mr. Mohi el-Din Zarroug's book, and it has been considered that the text, which has no reference to the new excavation, should be left unchanged. It should be noted that spectacular finds have been made recently in the large burial mounds at Hobagi and these may modify some of Mr. Mohi el-Din's conclusions.

I am especially pleased to see this publication on the Alwa kingdom published since much of the argument is based on the small-scale excavation which I carried out in the winters of 1950 and 1951 to 1952. This excavation, rather critically examined by Mr. Zarroug, was the first excavation that I carried out entirely on my own responsibility and certainly suffered from youthful inexperience. It was also achieved with a tiny financial grant. In spite of the deficiencies, I think some additions to knowledge were made and from forty years on I look back at the Soba experience with nostalgia and affection.

P.L. Shinnie

Introduction

A. Introduction to the Problem

THE DISINTEGRATION AND the collapse of the Meroitic central power around the fourth century A.D. gave rise to a distinctive period in Sudanese history referred to as mediaeval Nubia (often called Christian Nubia). Though there has been no clear definition for either the word "Nubia" or the word "mediaeval" in the context of Sudanese history, the phrase is used as a designation for the time span between the sixth to sixteenth centuries A.D. This corresponds with the period between the fall of the Meroitic realm and the rise of the Fung sultanate of Sennar at the beginning of the sixteenth century A.D. It also represents a transitional stage between paganism and the Islamization of the northern Sudan. The period is marked by the establishment of three Christian kingdoms in the area between the First Cataract in the north and the area south to the confluence of the White Nile and the Blue Nile, as well as the land to the east and west of the Nile Valley. These kingdoms, extending along the Nile from north to south were: Nobatia, Makouria, and Alwa. The first appearance of these independent states is known from the contemporary account of John of Ephesus who recorded the story of missionary activity in Nubia during the time of its conversion to Christianity in the mid-sixth century A.D.

In dealing with this period, this study will focus on the history and the cultural shape of the kingdom of Alwa. This kingdom, whose capital was the city of Soba, situated on the eastern bank of the Blue Nile, some 22.5 km above Khartoum, was the most southerly of the mediaeval kingdoms of the riverain Sudan. The early phase of the kingdom of Alwa as a political entity was known to the Greeks under the name of Alodia. The term (as recorded in the ecclesiastical history of John of Ephesus) was given by the Greeks during the Byzantine period to denote the land which the Arabs, after the conquest of Egypt, later named Alwa. The word "Alwa" antedates the mediaeval period and first appears as the name of a town during the decline of Meroe.

Archaeological, as well as historical evidence, has revealed that the kingdom maintained an autonomous existence of its own as late as the

early sixteenth century A.D. It is also known that the kingdom of Alwa occupied most of what is known today as the central Sudan. Indeed, Alwa possessed vast territories; archaeological sites related to Alwa have been reported from as far south as Sennar as well as from the western Sudan. This geographical delineation, which has been taken to mark the spread of Christianity in that part of the country is, to be sure, no more than guesswork, for the archaeology of this area remains poorly known. While it is assumed that the culture had a wide distribution in both time and space, there is still much information missing and many gaps still to be filled.

B. Scope of this Work

Since the beginning of the present century there have been many efforts made by numerous investigators to reveal the records of past human behaviour in the Sudan. The last decades have witnessed many discoveries which have revealed new chapters and which have rendered certain conceptions obsolete. Yet it should be borne in mind that most of the archaeological investigations have been confined to the extreme north of the Sudan, in the area between the First and Second Cataracts, often known as Lower Nubia. In other parts of the country, the situation is different—in archaeological terms, it is terra incognita.

This unbalanced research pattern is due to the largely fortuitous nature of archaeological work. The succession of dams built at Aswan since the beginning of this century has necessitated rescue operations; otherwise the sites would have been obliterated without any data being recovered. Another problem is the difficulty of finding archaeological sites, particularly monumental ones, in the area that was formerly the domain of Alwa, where there was an absence of suitable building material, such as sandstone, and where heavy summer rainfalls have obliterated aspects of the archaeological record. In this frame of reference, it appears that the countless ancient remains in the area to the north became more attractive to the early salvage archaeologists than other cultural aspects. Thus, excavation efforts have been directed mainly towards the grandiose and monumental sites to the general exclusion of the more mundane dwelling sites. Such being the case, there has been little interest in Alwa, the cultural history of which remains virtually unknown. Consequently, there is only scattered information bearing upon the history of Alwa.

However, the fact that Alwa has received little scholarly attention cannot be wholly attributed to the lack of archaeological sites, or to the difficulties arising from the geographical setting of the area. In addition to the particular problems pertaining to Alwa as a cultural entity, there are some basic questions concerning the interpretation and the mode of

inquiry of early Sudanese history in general. These questions are important because the major outlines of Alwa history cannot be investigated without reference to the biases which seem to dominate the early history of archaeological research. These first studies were guided by the a priori assumption that the history of Nubia was no more than a reflection of Egyptology. This conceptual framework was based largely on Egyptological and historical models, in which assumption becomes inference, and the degree of similarities between the two cultures becomes the focus of interest. Early historians were concerned mainly with isolating cultural traits and, as a result, were not concerned with ethnographic information.

In studies pertaining to the mediaeval period of the Sudan (sixth to sixteenth centuries A.D.), there is a clear bias toward the kingdom of Dongola, formed by the amalgamation of the earlier kingdoms of Nobatia and Makouria in about A.D. 700, while Alwa remains a neglected chapter. There is generally minimal reference made to Alwa, as if it were a backwater. Consequently, the question of what we know, in a broad sense, about the approximately one thousand year temporal span of Alwa as a definable political entity remains very obscure and mainly inferential. Among the important questions to be raised are: what are the cultural roots of Alwa and how can we delineate its ethnic composition and/or its cultural boundaries? and what was the role played by Alwa in the wider picture of Sudanese cultural history? These and many other problems are of importance, not only for those who are interested in the study of the cultural history of the mediaeval period, but to all students of early and modern Sudanese history. This study attempts to raise such questions and to suggest approaches to solve them, using a broad range of data from archaeology and other disciplines.

The cultural continuity of this region is strong. Basic subsistence techniques have been practised, and tools have been used and produced for hundreds of years. The persistence of most of the cultural elements through time is a reflection of a continuous pattern of sociocultural adaptation, exemplified in terms of the social organization, land tenure, and tradition.

An examination of these features will, no doubt, shed some light on the question of how the kingdom of Alwa came into being, and on the historical and political events which gave rise to its establishment. Most particularly, this book will explore the following two questions: (1) was there any connection or relationship between the predecessor state and Alwa? and (2) is there evidence of the arrival in the area of newcomers, or can a continuous population be inferred?

In coming to grips with these problems, it would be worthwhile if we were to touch briefly on the substance of Alwa as a social entity. This will lead to the consideration of historical and geographical aspects of the

area. In the heyday of the Meroitic empire, Alwa was certainly an area of settled life, and during the Christian era, and nearer our time it was the heartland of the powerful Fung sultanate of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries A.D.

Optimally situated in the Sudanese heartland, a low basin formed by the valleys of the Blue Nile and the White Nile, the early Alwan kingdom was strategically located. This geographical setting in the central Sudan was a zone of transition between the southern forest belt and the arid savanna of the north. Consequently, the region became a meeting ground of cultures and peoples. Situated at the junction of several great trade routes, Alwa owed most of its fame and prosperity to the popularity and accessability of its markets. To the north and south were the riverways which formed a natural network of transportation throughout the country. Westward was the trans-Bayuda caravan route, and eastward was the great caravan route which crossed the Atbara River and ran to the Red Sea ports. Southward were the wadi routes which tapped the cornfields and grazing plains of the Blue Nile, Dinder, Rahad and Gash rivers. The area was a vast tract of level land of considerable fertility, comprising both the Gezira and the Butana (see Map I). It was, and is still, the "granary of the Sudan" where Arab writers believed the crops were sown, watered and gathered by the hands of supernatural powers.

Investigating a given phenomenon means, at minimum, taking all the variables into consideration, and balancing all the probabilities. This is, to be sure, a job which is never finished. In this spirit, it is hoped that the present study will serve as a cautionary tale against over-hasty and narrowly conceived generalizations about the political composition, the socioeconomic organization, and, above all, the cultural history of the kingdom of Alwa.

C. Approach to the Problem

This study is an introductory exploration of the historical problems of the kingdom of Alwa. It does not claim to provide the only answers to the many quantitative and qualitative questions about the people and culture of this long-lived kingdom. At this stage, the factual information about Alwa is insufficient. It would appear that a better understanding of the complexity of Alwan cultural history will, of necessity, have to await further and more thorough field exploration. In the present state of knowledge, only a few general features about the history and the cultural development of the kingdom can be established.

To achieve this aim, and also to provide an indication of what is known about Alwa from different sources, the first chapter of this book will explore a wide range of the available historical data. The second chapter represents an examination of the archaeological data pertaining

to the kingdom of Alwa. The goal of this chapter is to elucidate, so far as the data permit, the underlying cultural significance of the archaeological record uncovered from Professor P.L. Shinnie's (1955a) excavation at Soba, as well as other known archaeological sites.

The third chapter will deal with a set of variables essential to an adequate understanding of the people and culture of Alwa. Some of these variables include the nature of the state and society in Alwa, the human ecology and cultural geography, and the socioeconomic organization. Although the main objective of this chapter is to highlight some of the immediate problems which need to be solved before the complex cultural history of Alwa can be understood, some tentative inferences can be provided. These inferences will be the product of extensive exploration and evaluation of some relevant anthropological literature, and of the more abundant literature available on the related kingdom of Makouria to the north.

The fourth chapter will explore the possibilities of other, new, approaches providing a better understanding of the past lifestyles and cultural processes in the geographical region under study. Unless the mechanisms of cultural change are understood, there remains the possibility that some major cultural changes in Sudanese history will remain hidden.

1 / *The Historical and Ethnographic Record*

HISTORICAL SOURCES TREATING Alwa will be reviewed within the following format: ancient sources, church historians, Arab geographers and travellers, and modern historical sources. In addition, the major points of view expressed by archaeologists concerning the nature of Alwa will be presented.

Alwa, the kingdom of which Soba was the capital, was the southernmost state of the riverain Sudan during the period between the decline of Meroe and the rise of the Fung sultanate in the early sixteenth century A.D. It survived the decline of Makouria, and its existence marked the shift of power and cultural development from the north (i.e. Nubia proper) to the central Sudan. This had many implications for Sudanese history. The reputation of the kingdom and the persistence of its influence may be reflected in the fact that modern people in the Sudan are said to still be accustomed to swearing oaths in the name of Soba, the once-powerful capital city of Alwa (Chataway, 1930). The fall of Soba appears in history as a catastrophe of the first magnitude, for it has persisted in tradition, and even today Soba is quoted as an example of complete annihilation (Crawford, 1951:28).

A. The Ancient Sources

It is not at all clear when the word "Alwa" first appeared in history, and the derivation of the word seems uncertain. The first possible reference to Alwa (as Alut?) is believed to be in the inscription of the Kushite king Nastasen. In his coronation stela, Nastasen (353-310 B.C.) says:

> I made Amen of Napata my good Father, to rise (like the Sun). He came forth from the Great House, and gave unto me the sovereignty of the land of Sti and Alut and the Nine Tribes who fight with the bow and the country on both sides of the river and the Four Quarters of the world. (Budge, 1907:98)

This inscription records how Nastasen was summoned from Meroe to Napata and given authority over Alut, by Amen. If the identification of Alwa with Alut is correct, then it seems that the word "Alwa" can be traced at least to Meroitic times (Kirwan, 1935:58; Shinnie, 1955a:11).

However, this identification of Alwa with Alut in Nastasen's text is far from certain. Further, it is not clear whether Alut referred specifically to a town, a district, or an administrative unit. In this sense, the identification of the word will no doubt require deeper knowledge of the ancient Egyptian and Meroitic languages, as well as information regarding the administration of the Meroitic empire. Alut is therefore a designation of a place, the exact location of which remains unknown.

The next reference to the name "Alwa" appears in an account of a classical writer. This time, the word "Alwa" is mentioned among other old Meroitic cities, as lying to the south of Meroe. The names "Alwa," "Daro," and "Meroe," were mentioned by Pliny in his *Natural history* (Kobishchanov, 1978:83). Perhaps Pliny's greatest contribution to Sudanese geography is his list of the place names from Egypt in the north to as far south as Sennar on the Blue Nile (Crawford, 1951:15). Some of the geographical and topographical features characteristic of the area immediately surrounding Meroe to the south can be extracted from this author. Yet, like other authorities of his time, Pliny unfortunately does not refer to the exact location of Alwa. A difficulty also arises from the fact that most of the names of places given by the classical writers, from the first century before and after our era, are rarely used in the present-day, or are unidentifiable.

Around the fourth century A.D., the word "Alwa" appears again in the inscription of the Axumite king Ezana. The dating of this text is not absolute, but it is conventionally placed around A.D. 350 (Kirwan, 1960:163; 1972:461). Although the inscription contains a number of ambiguities, it is our only historical record for the period between the downfall of Meroe and the rise of the Christian monarchy at Soba two centuries later. It records a campaign in which the king led his army into the heartland of the Meroitic empire, traditionally known as the Island of Meroe or the Butana, i.e. the land which lies in the triangle between Atbara, Khartoum, and Kassala. The relevant passage in this inscription, which was originally written in Ge'ez and translated into German by Littman (1913), is rendered in English as follows:

> The son of Ella Amid, king of Axum (and from). . . . By the might of the Lord of the all, I made war upon the Noba for the peoples had rebelled and made a boast of it. And they were in the habit of attacking the peoples of Mangurto and Hasa and Barya and the blacks and made war upon the Red Peoples. And as they broke the oath a second and a third time and they refused to cease from killing their neighbours and our messenger and our envoy. And as I again sent and they did not listen but rejected and then betook themselves to fight I made war upon them . . . and fought war with them on the Takkaze (Atbara River) at the ford of Kemlke. Thereupon they took flight and would not make a stand. And I followed after for twenty and three days, killing some and capturing others. . . . Meanwhile I burnt their towns both those built of

> bricks and those built of reeds and my soldiers carried off their food and copper and iron . . . and destroyed the statues of their temples and their stock of corn and cotton trees and tumbled them into the River Seda (Nile). And I came to Kasu and fought a battle and made prisoners at the junction of the Rivers Takkaze and Seda. The names of the cities built of bricks were Alwa and Daro. The towns which the Noba had taken were Tabiro and Fartoti. (Littman, 1913:32-35, my translation, somewhat abbreviated from the original).

This inscription suggests the existence of at least two possibly different groups: the Noba, in the Island of Meroe and as far north and west as the Atbara River, and the Kasu to the northwest near the junction of the Nile and the Atbara. Immediately downstream from these rivers, the Noba and the Kasu would seem to have been dwelling side by side. It is not certain whether "Kasu" (Kush) refers specifically to the city of Meroe, or to the inhabitants of the Meroitic empire. However, whatever the nature of the relation between these groups might have been, it would appear that by the time of Ezana's arrival in the territory of the Meroites, the Noba, who seem to have been the main enemy of Axum, had already possessed themselves of a large part of the Island of Meroe, including some of its brick-built cities and temples (Adams, 1977:387).

In spite of the great importance of Ezana's inscription, it is difficult to make a critical analysis of this document. Many of the details of the inscription are not clear, and few of the place names can be identified. It is not clear whether the Meroitic dynasty had already succumbed, either to the inroads of the Noba or to an earlier Axumite invasion. As observed by Kirwan:

> Admittedly the evidence is fragmentary, but the impression is that intermittently from the first century A.D. at least Axum had been a threat to Meroe and the Butana was not infrequently the scene of battles between the powers. As Hintze has suggested (Hintze 1959:190) the incised picture of King Sherkarer . . . at Jebel Qeili may possibly . . . commemorate a Meroitic victory over Axum or the repulse of an Axumite advance. Then there are two other Axumite inscriptions concerned with the Island of Meroe, both probably antedating the Ezana inscription. One is the very fragmentary Greek inscription on black basalt found by Sayce at Meroe . . . commemorating an Axumite capture of the city. The other is the Greek inscription seen and in part copied at Adulis by the sixth century topographer, Cosmas Indicopleustes. This may be the work of King Aphilas, and Glaser and others considered . . . that it dated from the second half of the third century. After a long list of territories and peoples conquered to the north, east, and south of Axum, the king in the Cosmas inscription (his name is missing) continues: For this success I now offer my thanks to my mighty God Ares who begat me by those aids. I reduced all the nations bordering on my own country, on the east as far as the Land of Incense and on the west as far

> as the Land of Ethiopia and Sasu. [Sasu must surely be a mistranscription for Kasu]. (Kirwan, 1960:171-72)

Following from the above, it appears that the early history of Alwa as an emerging political unit was related to the later history of the Meroitic civilization. It is also apparent from the inscription that the early beginnings of Alwa, as successor state of the Meroitic power and as a rival to the Axumite kingdom, were associated with the Noba. However, our sources for the cultural development of the period following the decline of the Meroitic realm in the fourth century A.D. and the rise of the Alwan kingdom are exceedingly scarce. For the most part, the data are by no means complete enough to provide valid inferences concerning either the decline of Meroe, or the early establishment of the kingdom of Alwa (see Kirwan, 1939, 1957, 1960, 1972; Shinnie, 1955a, 1967, 1978; Adams, 1977).

There is no recognizable mention of Meroe in the Ezana inscription. Instead, Alwa is numbered among the cities "built of brick," captured from the Noba by the Axumite king (Kirwan, 1935). The reason that there is no mention of Meroe in the text has long been debated and remains a matter of controversy among scholars. Two explanations for this controversy appear: either Meroe is mentioned, only under another name, or else it had already succumbed to the inroads of the Noba (Crowfoot, 1911b:37). The former view seems to have been accepted by a number of scholars, including Kirwan (1935, 1960, 1972), Arkell (1961), Sayce (1912), and Hintze (1968). According to Crawford (1951), Krammerer had even tried to prove that Alwa is the same name as Meroe. In favour of this argument Kirwan says:

> There is no reason to suppose, as Monneret de Villard supposed, that because there is in the Ezana text no recognizable mention of Meroe under that name, the city had been completely wiped out. On the contrary. The Meroitic dynasty may have come to an end but archaeology shows that the site of Meroe continued to be occupied first and foremost by the Noba, the owners of the Noba-type "Alwa" ware so characteristic of the latest period at Meroe. The Noba whom Ezana's text shows in occupation of several Meroitic cities were the dominant power and the ringleaders of the revolt against him. Meroe would thus have been an immediate target for his troops and for this reason I agree with Sayce, and most recently Hintze in identifying Alwa with Meroe. (Kirwan, 1960:168)

This statement shows the distribution of the Noba, who were rivals of Axum, but it does not by itself justify the identification of Alwa with Meroe. It would appear that if the aim of Ezana had been to destroy Meroe, he would have commemorated his victory over the Meroitic central power (i.e. over Meroe itself and not over the Noba, who seem to

have overrun the Meroitic empire). From the inscription it seems clear that the campaign was provoked by the Noba, and that Ezana responded to the appeals from the frontier tribes. The request of Ezana to the Noba, through his messenger and envoy, implies that there was some kind of coordinating body, and suggests that the Noba were probably in their formative stage of political organization. The nuclear centre of this political power was probably Alwa, as attested from the subsequent events (see Chapter 3).

The identification of Alwa—the city of Ezana's inscription—as the name of an independent state with an identifiable headquarters, seems to be a reasonable possibility. This view is held by a number of scholars such as Budge (1907), MacMichael (1922), Crawford (1951), and Shinnie (1955a). It is apparent that whenever Alwa is mentioned in any context that defines locality, the region of Soba is always intended. In view of this statement, MacMichael argues that:

> Though Alut on the stela of Nastasen refers no doubt to the district, it is natural to suppose that its capital was the town subsequently famous by the same name. The name seems to survive in the dual form of "Alwan" the name of a district inland from Soba. (MacMichael, 1922:47)

It is clear from the above citation that the term "Alwa," the name of the kingdom of which Soba was the capital, was also used as the name of the town of Soba, that is, a designation of both the district and its chief town or capital. The identification of Alwa with Soba seems to have been well recognized in the historiography of Sudanese archaeology. Shinnie maintained that there was no reason for identifying Alwa with Meroe, and that "it was more reasonable to assume that Alwa is, as its name implies, Soba which became the capital of the medieval kingdom of Alwa" (Shinnie, 1955b:82).

On the basis of other information, there appears to exist a remarkable parallel between Alwa and Soba being used to denote both the site and the district. It is interesting to note that the word "Soba" is said to have been fairly common as a place name. During my fieldwork in 1977-78, at the site of Soba, I was told by the local people that Soba does not only refer to the Christian remains extending over two or three square kilometres, but to the area extending from the village of Kuku in the north to as far south as Eilafun on the east bank of the Blue Nile, a distance of 24 km. Thus it comprises a considerable number of villages both along the Blue Nile and further inland (see Map II).

Before the middle of the fourth century A.D., Meroe had 'fallen on evil days' and a process of disintegration had set in. From this point onwards, very little is known about the history of the people living in the Island of Meroe until the time of the Christian missionaries in Nubia

during the mid-sixth century A.D. This was the time during which Christian Nubia came into being.

B. The Church Historians

The conversion of the people of the central and northern Sudan to Christianity in the sixth century A.D. was concurrent with the rise of the powerful kingdoms of Nobatia, Makouria, and Alwa, and it had a far-reaching effect on the subsequent cultural history of the Sudan. The study of literary and archaeological evidence provides considerable information about the culture and the technological developments which distinguish this period from both earlier and later periods. Though the general mode of life in the riverain Sudan remained largely unchanged, Christianity was adopted to such an extent that it became the state religion and a symbol of nationality. The new faith was closely identified with local ruling institutions, especially that of the kingly office.

The early history of Alwa (known in the Greek form as Alodia) as an emerging Christian community, as well as a political entity, is known from the contemporary account written by John of Ephesus in the sixth century A.D. John of Ephesus was born at Amida in Mesopotamia in A.D. 516 and served for thirty years at the Byzantine Court (Kirwan, 1937:289). In his *Ecclesiastical history* (originally written in Syriac and translated by R. Payne-Smith [1860]), John of Ephesus left valuable information concerning the Christianization of the country. His work is not only our main source for the history of missionary activity in Sudan at that time, but it also provides reliable information about the political conditions since the time of Meroitic power.

At the time when John of Ephesus was writing, there were three distinct and independent kingdoms—each with its own king—as seen from this passage:

> The country in the north immediately south of Egypt was in the hands of the Nobadae, far to the south were the people whom the Greeks called Alodaei [Alwan] whilst between the Nobadae and the Alodaei is a country inhabited by another people called the Makoritae. (John of Ephesus, in Payne-Smith, 1860:315-19)

The process of Christianization among these political units appears to be interconnected, as told by John of Ephesus. Two separate missions were sent out from Constantinople in A.D. 543 to convert the above-mentioned peoples: one represented the Orthodox, or the Melkite party which was patronized by Emperor Justinian, while the other was supported by Empress Theodora and propounded Monophysite (Jacobite) theology. In his account, John of Ephesus related that, sponsored by Theodora, a priest named Julian arrived in the territory of the Nobadae

about A.D. 543 and stayed there for two years, during which time he succeeded in converting the king of the Nobadae and his people to Christianity. After Julian's return to Constantinople, Longinus was appointed to replace him and thus came to be in charge of the Christian mission, but it was not until A.D. 569 that he arrived at the country of the Nobadae. He remained there for six years and then left the Nobadae for Alexandria in order to take part in the election of the Monophysite patriarch, Peter IV. This matter, together with the consequences of Longinus' journey to Alexandria, is of no immediate concern (see Payne-Smith, 1860:250-58).

By A.D. 579, Longinus had returned to the Nobadae. However, this time he journeyed further in order to convert the people whom the Greeks called Alodaei (Alwa). It appears from the account of John of Ephesus that the king of the Alodaei had repeatedly requested the Nobadae to persuade Longinus to come and instruct them in a similar fashion. Meanwhile, the Melkite missionaries heard of this and sent two bishops, and others, to Alodia with orders, saying that since Longinus had been deposed and hence was unable to baptize and ordain legally, these two bishops would instruct them in the right path. But the king of the Alodaei would not receive them saying:

> We know not who you are, nor can we receive you, nor be baptized by you: but we will receive him who baptized the Nobadae. . . . And as for what you say of him, we do not listen to it, for we see that you are his enemies, and speak thus of him from envy. Depart therefore, from our land, that you die not miserably. (John of Ephesus, in Payne-Smith, 1860: 318)

However, in A.D. 580—the date is given by John of Ephesus—Longinus set out for Alodia. His journey to the south was not without danger, as King Awarfuila of the Nobadae wrote to Theodora at Alexandria:

> But because of the wicked devices of him who dwells between us, I mean the King of the Makoritae, I sent my saintly father to the King of the Blemmyes, that he might conduct him thither by routes further inland, but the Makoritae heard also of this and set people on the look out in all the passes of his kingdom, both in the mountains and in the plains, and as far as the Sea of Weeds (the Red Sea), wishing to lay hands on my father. (John of Ephesus, in Payne-Smith, 1860:325)

It is clear from the above citation that Longinus could not travel by the Nile route because of the opposition of the Makoritae (Makourites) and thus the Nobadae had to arrange for him to go through the eastern desert. However, after all their trials, Longinus and his companion fell in with a royal escort, led by a prince named Itika, who had been sent by

the king of Alodia to meet them. The bishop, in his letter to the king of the Nobadae, says:

> And on our arrival at the river's bank, we went on board a vessel, and the king hearing of our arrival rejoiced, and came out in person to meet us and received us with great joy. And by the grace of God we taught him, and have baptized him and his nobles and all his family. (John of Ephesus, in Payne-Smith, 1860:322)

He then goes on, and this further passage indicates that the Christian influence was well established in Alodia before his mission arrived:

> But inasmuch as there are certain Abyssinians, who have fallen into the malady of the fancy of Julianus (Julianus of Halicarnassus) and say, that Christ suffered in a body not capable of pain, or of death, we have told them what is the correct belief, and have required them to anathematize this heresy in writing, and have received those persons upon their presenting their recantation. (John of Ephesus, in Payne-Smith, 1860:323).

Such is a summary of the account by John of Ephesus in regards to the conversion of the Nobadae and the Alodaei to Christianity in the tenets of Monophysitism. This being so, the two kingdoms had, as indicated from this account, maintained good relations. This is further seen from the letter written by the king of the Alodaei thanking the king of the Nobadae, and asking for church furnishings:

> Thy love is remembered by us, my lord . . . because thou hast now shown thyself my true kinsman and that not only in body but also in the spirit, in having sent our common spiritual father, who has shown me the way of truth and of the true light of Christ our God and had baptized me and my nobles and all my family. And in everything the work of Christ is multiplied . . . and am desirous of doing thy pleasure, and driving thy enemies from thy land. For he is not thy enemy alone, but also mine, for thy land is my land and thy people my people. . . . As we have need, however, of church furniture, get some ready for us. . . (John of Ephesus, in Payne-Smith, 1860:320).

It is noteworthy that John of Ephesus said nothing about the evangelical efforts among the Makoritae, a kingdom which appears to have been hostile both to the Nobadae and the Alodaei. This puzzle is solved by another contemporary historian. The Melkite, John of Biclarum, claimed that the Makoritae were converted to the Melkite faith around A.D. 569. It is possible therefore, that the Justinian mission was not wholly without success (Kirwan, 1935; 1937).

It is difficult to draw a line between the sociopolitical and religious spheres, and the question of the doctrinal and political affiliation (Melkite

vs. Monophysite) of the Nubian church. This has been, and remains, the subject of much scholarly debate, and has been examined by a number of authorities, including Shinnie (1954b, 1978); Vantini (1970, 1978); Haycock (1972); Osman (1973, 1978); and Adams (1977).

There is no evidence in the writings of John of Ephesus of any forcible conversions and the religion seems to have been accepted by these peoples, though it must surely have been wise for the nobles to adopt the official religion. If the Nobadae and the Alodaei on one hand, and the Makoritae on the other hand, were set apart in terms of religious adherence and/or allegiance, nevertheless, their adoption of the Christian faith created a cultural stimulus and a new moral and sociopolitical bond. In his account, John of Ephesus did not, however, give any exact information as to the boundaries of these kingdoms, nor were the capitals of these kingdoms mentioned. The missing information is supplemented by the Arab writers.

C. The Arab Geographers and Travellers

The opening of the trade route through the eastern desert gave the Arab travellers a much more realistic view of the country and the people. Their records provide the most valuable sources of information for the history of the Sudan during the Middle Ages. Their documents are of great scholarly importance, particularly owing to the long time span (seventh to fifteenth centuries A.D.) of the Arab writings, and to the wide range of topics they covered, which included the geography, topography, and ethnography of the area, together with an account of general historical and/or political events.

In treating the descriptive evidence of the Arab writers, only that information bearing upon the kingdom of Alwa will be considered here. The full range of information has been listed and summarized by Hasan (1967), Vantini (1970, 1975) and Mus'ad (1972). Among the most important and informative descriptions of the Kingdom of Alwa are those left by Ahmed b. Abi Yaqub, known as al-Yaqubi (d. 284 A.H./A.D. 897), Abul Qasim Muhamed b. Hawqal (d. 350 A.H./A.D. 956), Abdalla b. Ahmad b. Sulaym al-Aswani (d. 386 A.H./A.D. 996), and Abu Salih al-Armani (d. 605 A.H./A.D. 1208). Other important works combining biographies, history, and topography are those of Ibn Khaldun, al-Maqrizi, al-Idrisi and Ibn Abd al-Zahir.

Arab writers confirmed that the kingdom of Nobatia was in the north, from the First to the Third Cataract. This kingdom is referred to in Arabic accounts as al-Maris, with its capital at Bajrash (the modern Faras). To the south, and stretching as far as the place known to the Arab writers as al-Abwab, was the kingdom of Makouria (al-Muqurra in

Arabic) with its capital at Dongola. Further south again was the kingdom of Alodia (or Alwa in Arabic), the capital of which was Soba.

The two northern kingdoms of al-Maris and al-Muqurra, which were at odds with one another during the time of their conversion to Christianity (as indicated from the history of John of Ephesus), merged into a kind of confederation in which al-Muqurra was politically dominant. Thenceforth, the two formed a single state often called the Dongola kingdom, having its royal seat at Dongola. Although there is no general agreement as to the precise date of this amalgamation, the Baqt treaty, which the Muslims negotiated with the Nubians in A.D. 652, made no differentiation between the kingdom of Dongola and that of Makouria (Osman, 1973). Its first item runs as follows:

> Covenant from Amir Abdallah b. Sa'ad b. Abi Sarh to the king of the Nubians from the frontier of the land of Aswan to the border of the land of Alwa. (Maqrizi, quoted in Mus'ad, 1972:302, my translation)

There is no mention made of the northern kingdom of Nobatia. This silence in the treaty would seem to suggest that Nobatia had ceased to exist as an independent political entity by the middle of the seventh century A.D. In regard to the question of how, why, and when this event took place, the reader is referred to—among other sources—Kirwan (1935), Shinnie (1954b), Michalowski (1963), and Osman (1973). What is important here is that, from that time onward, it is agreed that there were only two independent Nubian kingdoms: al-Muqurra and Alwa. This division is maintained by al-Masudi in his writings six decades later.

In returning to the descriptive evidence of the Arab writers, the accounts given by al-Yaqubi, Ibn Hawqal, al-Aswani and Abu Salih in reference to the kingdom of Alwa deserve more explanation. These are not the only Arab observers who left us a picture of prosperous and well-ordered kingdoms, but their descriptions are selected as being representative and because they covered a time spanning the period between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries A.D.

Al-Yaqubi, the first among the Arab writers to mention the kingdom of Alwa, is considered a reliable source for geographical information. He wrote a compendium of history called *Tarikh al-Yaqubi*. He also compiled his celebrated geography *Kitab al-Buldan* (Hasan, 1967:187). The information quoted below from al-Yaqubi is from the *Kitab al-Buldan* as quoted in Mus'ad (1972:11-19, my translation). He wrote:

> He who travels from Al-Allaqi to the country of Nubia called Alwa has to travel 30 stages, first towards Kabaw, then towards Al-Abwab then to the great city of Alwa called Soba, the seat of the king. The Muslims go thither from time to time, and from which information about the sources of the Nile comes. Also it is said that the Island of Alwa is

> connected with the Island of Sind, and that the Nile behind the land of Alwa turns toward the Sind and flows into the river which is called Mahran. Thence the same Nile flows into the Nile of Egypt and rises at the same time as in Egypt. On the Island of Alwa, as on that of the Sind, there are elephants, rhinoceroses and the like. In the Mahran River there are crocodiles, as in the Egyptian Nile.

In another passage concerning the Nubians, al-Yaqubi says:

> The Nuba are divided into two kingdoms. One is the kingdom of those who called Muqurra, who dwell on the eastern and western bank of this Nile and had Dongola as their capital. It was they who made peace with the Muslims and gave them the Baqt; theirs is the country of palm trees, vineyards and cultivation. The kingdom of Nuba which is called Alwa is more powerful than Muqurra; their capital is called Soba, and they have a large country about three months' journey. In their country the Nile branches off into several streams.

Ibn Hawqal, a famous Arab geographer and traveller, set out from Baghdad in A.D. 943, and for thirty years travelled through the Muslim world and other countries. Among the countries he claimed to have visited was the kingdom of Alwa, and his detailed description of Alwa justifies this claim. He wrote two books: *Al masalik wa al-mamalik* and *Surat al-ard*. Our information about the kingdom of Alwa is based on first-hand information drawn from his book, *Surat al-ard*, as quoted in Mus'ad (1972:62-76, my translation). To quote Ibn Hawqal:

> The Nubians are also Christians. Their country is larger and richer than Ethiopia. The Nile of Egypt runs through their cities and regions. Their villages are prosperous and they have fertile lands, yielding abundant palm trees, agriculture and vegetables. One of their most prosperous places is the region of Alwa, where one finds an uninterrupted chain of villages and towns and a continuous cultivated land, so that a traveller may in one day pass through many villages, one joining the next supplied with flowing waters drawn from the Nile by means of saqia. When I was in Alwa, their king was Isbanus Karjuwa b. Juwti, who died after seventeen years of rule. He was succeeded by his nephew Istabnus b. Yerki. And it was common practice in the Sudan, that when a king died he was succeeded by his nephew (i.e. by his sister's son) and not by any other relatives or any member of the family. The length of his country from al-Muqurra, that is to say from the extreme frontier of the Kingdom of Dongola—which actually is under the authority of the lord of Alwa [al-Alawi]—extends [upstream] to the country of the Kersa, one month's journey along the Nile. Its width is the distance between the Nile and Taflien, a distance of eight days towards the east. This country includes the river known as Sensabi, which is a tributary of the Nile, and which has its sources in Al-Habasha; and the river which is known as Al-Dujn, which also comes from Al-Habasha but ends in the region of Dujn.

There are in Dujn continuous villages which have water, trees, agriculture and animals. To the centre of this valley [the plain] is Taflien which has seasonal villages for bedouins, who occupy them during the rainy season for pasture. They have an Arabic-speaking king, who is appointed by the King of Alwa. They are not agriculturalists, but they breed camels and cattle; there are among them many Muslims who have no known centres of their own. These Muslims travel to and trade with Mecca and other places. The Taflien people are neighbours to the Bazin, a people who live in groups of straw huts which look like villages. They have cattle and till the land. They are governed by their Sheikhs. They do not ride anything but walk equipped with spears and wooden pikes and there are no knights among them. They are subject to no authority and profess no religion, but only believe in one God whom they called Anneh. Moving from Taflien to the Valley of Barakah, which is mentioned above, the Barakah River runs from Al-Habasha through Bazin towards the Beja, then flows into the Sea between Suwakin and Badi. And there is in Upper Alwa a river which is called Awr and which runs from the east to join the Nile. A Nubian tribe called Mernakah live along the river. After a distance of two days up this river, there is nearby another river called Atweti. Along this river, and as far as Al-Habasha, live a great number of Nubians who are known as Kersa. These are large watery rivers. They join the river of Soba, then to the country of Al-Muqurra which is the country of Dongola, then to Aswan. Some people say that they go in the upper part of this river, I mean the Nile, from the upper part of the country of the Kersa people to the country of Tubli, and they do not trade with these people, because they go naked, and nobody knows what they eat or how they are. The people of Kersa wear the zifal, a kind of loin-cloth with which they surround their body, the part of the cloth which remains hanging [from the waist] they fold up between the thighs and tie up to that part of Zifal which is fixed near the nombril. And to the west of the Nile there is a big river which runs westward, with a great discharge called the White Nile, along whose bank live a Nubian people. Between the White Nile and the stem of the Nile mentioned above there is a large island, the limits of which are not known. All kinds of wild game and beasts are found there, and it is inhabited by the Nubians, the Kersa and other peoples. To the west of this White Nile there is a nation which is called Al-Jeblien [those of the mountains] who are in obedience [vassals to] to the king of Dongola, who is the king of Al-Muqurra and Al-Maris. And between Alwa and the nation that is known as Al-Jeblien there is a sandy desert extending to the country of Amqal which is a large region with innumerable villages which cannot be counted and whose frontiers cannot be described. These nations are called Al-Ahdin. Rich mines of pure gold and iron are found in this country. The western frontiers of these people are not well known. They have relations with the west and dress like Al-Maghariba and make use of camels and horses. Their armament consists of shields, spears, and swords. They are Christian and they are in obedience to the king of Alwa, who resides at a distance of five days, three of them desert, from them.

This is, by far, the most comprehensive Arabic description of the kingdom of Alwa. Despite the fact that some of the place names and peoples' names mentioned by Ibn Hawqal are not known, it is possible to identify most of them (see Chapter 3), because Ibn Hawqal's description is so accurate and explicit. His descriptive evidence roughly corresponds to the present-day environmental niches of the central Sudan. Most of his detailed observations on the topographical features so characteristic of this area, together with the human activity in those regions, would serve as a reliable guide book even today.

Ibn Hawqal's regional divisions correspond remarkably well to the four main zones recognized by modern geographers: (1) the eastern zone of the Atbara and the Gash rivers; (2) the southern zone of the Dinder and the Rahad rivers as far east as Ethiopia; (3) the central zone of the Gezira, i.e. the land between the Blue Nile and the White Nile; and (4) the western zone of Kordofan extending probably to Darfur. Central to Ibn Hawqal's account is the fact that Alwa was a vast country composed of different geographical regions, inhabited by different ethnic groups practising different economic activities (both locally and extending beyond the frontier of Alwa).

While Ibn Hawqal did not clarify the provincial political divisions of the kingdom of Alwa, his account did touch on the nature of the political administration and the socio-religious organization of the Alwans. It can be deduced from his account that some form of matrilineal succession was practised.

Al-Aswani, who is recognized as one of the most reliable among the Arab writers, was sent on an official diplomatic mission to hand a letter from Gahar al-Sigeli, the first Fatimid ruler of Egypt, to King George of Dongola. After completing his mission, he travelled to the kingdom of Alwa. Although his original work, *Akhbar al-Nuba wa al-Muqurra wa Alwa wa al-Beja wa al-Nil*, has been lost, it was read and used by Maqrizi (d. A.D. 1445) who quoted and preserved some lengthy passages from it. Al-Aswani, whose geographical and ecological descriptions were often accurate and explicit, was an eye-witness to much of what he described. In his words, al-Aswani said, as quoted in Mus'ad (1972:99-114, translation mine):

> The beginning of the country of Alwa is a number of villages on the east bank of the Nile known as Al-Abwab. This district has a governor named Al-Wahwah appointed by the king of Alwa. From this district the Nile branches into seven streams, one of which, coming from an easterly direction, has turbid water but gets so dry in summer that people camp in its bed. When the flood season comes, water springs from its bed and rises up in pools which are in the river, then rains and downpours come in the rest of the country and the level of the water rises in the Nile. The historian of the Nuba, Simon, who is well-acquainted with the country

of Alwa, told me that under the mud of the bed of this river there is a large kind of fish without scales which is unlike that of the Nile. Along that river, there is a mixed race between the Alwa and the Beja known as Al-Dujn and another race called Bazah. Beyond these peoples is the beginning of the country of Al-Habasha. Then there is the White Nile, which is a river coming from the west; it is intensely white like milk. On its bank there are the people of different races. Then there is the Green Nile, a river which flows from the southeastern direction. During the flood season such kind of wood as teak logwood, and a wood which smells like olibanum float downstream. Also large logs are brought down which can be worked into helms for boats. This kind of wood also grows on its banks. It is also said that the wood of frankincense is found. . . . These two rivers, the White and the Green, meet near the capital of the sovereign of the country of Alwa. Between these two rivers is an island, the end of which is not known, nor does anybody know the southern end of these two rivers. Many races dwell in this island.

He (al-Aswani) said:

I was told that some kings of the country of Alwa set out to see the extreme limits of the island, but they failed to reach it after a number of years. . . . The other four rivers also flow from the south-eastern direction all in the same season. Their sources are not known. Some of the four rivers come from the countries of the Zanj because they carry wood of the Zanj type. They differ from the White and the Green Rivers in width and in the number of streams and islands. All these rivers flow into the Green River as well as the first one mentioned, and they join the White Nile. All the rivers' banks are inhabited and cultivated. One journeys through them by boats. And Soba, a town of Alwa, [Al-Alwai] is to the east of the large island which is between the White and the Green Rivers, at its northern tip, near their junction, on the eastern bank of the river. It has fine buildings, and extensive dwellings and churches full of gold and gardens. There is also a great quarter where many Muslims live. The King of Alwa is more powerful than the King of Al-Muqurra, and had a larger army. His country is more extensive and fertile, but palm trees and vines are less numerous in his country. Their grain is the white millet, which resembles rice, from which they make their bread and their beer. They have plenty of meat because of the abundance of cattle and large plains, for grazing plains lands are so vast that it takes several days to reach the mountains. They have excellent horses and tawny camels of pure Arabian pedigree. Their religion is Christianity of the Jacobite sect, and their bishops are dependent on the Patriarch of Alexandria. Like the Nuba, their books are in Greek which they translate into their own language. Their understanding is less than the Nuba. The rule of their king is absolute and unquestioned. He is crowned with a crown of gold, for the gold is found in plenty in this country. One of the marvels of his country is that in the large island between the two rivers, there is a race called Al-Kersa, who have a vast

> land which is watered by the Nile and the rain. When the time for sowing comes, everyone goes out with whatever seed he had and traces the boundaries of the land according to his quantity of seed; he spreads a little of the seed in the four corners of the field and puts the remainder of the seed in the middle of the field and also a little *mizr* ("beer"), and then he goes away. The next morning he finds that the area he has enclosed has been sown and the mizr has been drunk. When it is harvest time, he harvests a small part of the crop and places it wherever he likes together with a little mizr and goes away; then he finds that all the crop has been harvested. If he wants to have it threshed or winnowed he acts in the same way. If anyone wants to clear his seed of the weeds, and by mistake uproots even a little seed, he will find—on the morrow—that all the seed has been uprooted. This region, where the things I have mentioned take place, contains vast countries equal to two months' journey in both length and width, and all of it is sown at the same time. And the provisions of the country of Alwa and their king came from this region. They send their boats and these came back loaded.

Al-Aswani said:

> This account is true and pertains to all the Nuba and the Alwa. And the Muslim traders and all those who travel over the country have no doubt about it nor suspicion. If this story is not so well known and widely spread no one would believe any part of what I reported, but would treat it as a shameful lie. The people of that region believe that the Jnun do this. . . .

Al-Aswani's description confirmed the earlier account of Ibn Hawqal that Alwa was a large country. Both have shed some light on trade activities within the kingdom of Alwa, and between it and the outside world, namely with other parts of Nubia and across the Red Sea. However, while the latter provided more details about the regional division of the kingdom and its people, the former mentioned one of the administrative units of the kingdom of Alwa. This was al-Abwab ("the gates"), which was the northern province of the kingdom of Alwa. The geographical extent (to the north) of this district, which marks the southern boundary of the kingdom of Dongola and the northern limits of the kingdom of Alwa, has not been delimited with certainty. It is said to be near the present Abu Hamed, according to some (including Jackson, 1926), or near Kabushiya—Old Meroe—according to others (including Hasan, 1967). The former identification seems to correspond with al-Aswani's description, wherein he stated that "in this region the Nile bends to run from east to west . . . this bend leads to El-Shinka, the well known mine in the country called Shingier." He also states, "there are from this place (Shingier) roads to Suwakin, Buda and Dhlak" (al-Aswani, quoted in Mus'ad, 1972:97-98). It was precisely here that al-Umari came in the ninth

century A.D. on his conquests, for the area, as mentioned by al-Aswani, was famous for its mining activity (Adams, 1977:470).

This precise description makes it clear that Shingier was in the vicinity of Abu Hamed (Osman, 1978:39). A letter from Caliph Abdulla al-Ta'shi (1885-1899) to his followers in the Robatab area and "Boghaz" (bottle neck) was found in 1977. Osman, who found this document, argued that this might strongly suggest that "even as late as the end of the nineteenth century the vicinity of Abu Hamed was called "Boghaz," which might be a survival of the early name of Abu Hamed" (Osman, 1978:40).

An additional reason for thinking Abu Hamed might mark the boundary is that it corresponds to a discontinuity in pottery distribution. As Jackson stated: "Makourra [Makouria] pottery does not occur very much upstream of Abu Hamed nor the Alwa pottery downstream" (1926:26). However, on the basis of Shinnie's excavations at Tanqasi, and the discovery of the so-called Alwa ware, the northern frontier of Alwa is assumed by Arkell (1961) to be in the vicinity of Karima (see Map I). For the moment, and until further systematic explorations in the Middle Nile region have taken place, it is safe to assume that the northern limits of al-Abwab lie somewhere in the vicinity of the Abu Hamed district.

With regard to the provincial divisions and/or the administrative units of the kingdom of Alwa, al-Aswani's account is very general compared to his detailed account of the kingdom of Dongola, perhaps because he was more interested in the sources of the Nile than in Alwa itself. Of key importance in this account is the mention of horses, vitally important as political and military instruments for they made possible the concentration of military force at a short distance, rapid communication of orders from capital to provinces, and the penetration of uncontrolled areas. Displays of horse-riding on ceremonial occasions, with elaborate trappings of the chief and his emissaries, which remain so characteristic today, are not merely ostentatious details but are important symbols of authority and were once the keys to power over this vast area.

One of the most important aspects of al-Aswani's description of the kingdom of Alwa is his attempt to explain a peculiarity of agriculture in this area—namely the rainfall cultivation system. This is clearly seen in his last passage which is concerned with some legends about the supernatural assistance thought to be rendered by the Jnun, or spirits, in cultivating the vast rainy lands of Alwa.

The latest Arabic description of the kingdom of Alwa is that of Abu Salih al-Armani who lived in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries A.D. He is the author of *Tarikh al-Shaykh Abu Salih al-Armani* which has been published under the title *The churches and monasteries of Egypt and neighbouring countries.* Although the book is mainly an account of the Nubian church and its institutions, it contains some information

with regard to Alwa. The relevant note is quoted in Mus'ad (1972:136-47). In this passage Abu Salih said:

> Town of Alwa: Here there are troops and a large kingdom with wide districts in which there are four hundred churches. The town lies to the east of the large island between the two rivers, the White and the Green Nile. All its inhabitants are Jacobite Christian. Around it there are monasteries and dwellings at some distance from the stream and some upon its banks. In the town there is a very large and spacious church, more skilfully planned and constructed than all the churches in the country, it is called the Church of Manbali. Their crops depend upon the Nile and upon the rain; when they are about to sow their fields, they plough or trace out furrows in the field and bring a supply of mizr and go away, and afterwards they find the seed has been sown in the ground and the mizr has been drunk. So again at the time of the harvest they reap some of the corn, and leave beside the rest of it a supply of mizr, and in the morning they find the harvest completed, and they say that this is done by beings of a different order from ours.

This description of the kingdom of Alwa follows very closely that written by al-Aswani.

In summary, the above mentioned descriptive evidence has revealed the existence of a flourishing Christian community. Most of the Arab accounts described Alwa at the height of its prosperity. Regrettably, there are no references as such to the organizational structure of the kingdom of Alwa. From the Arab writers (namely Ibn Hawqal), we know that Alwa had a diverse geographical, economic, and ethnic composition. This pronounced heterogeneity may be designated as a plural society. In Chapters 3 and 4, the integrative mechanisms which contributed to the rise and maintenance of the heterogeneous state of Alwa will be considered.

D. The Modern Historical Sources

Although the civilization of mediaeval Nubia (sixth to sixteenth centuries A.D.) remains obscure, two main viewpoints about mediaeval Nubia can be identified: the first is represented by those who have offered general surveys of most of the history of the Sudan, treating the mediaeval period superficially; the second is seen in the writings of those concerned with the study of the mediaeval period, and particularly the history of the Fung sultanate of Sennar (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries A.D.).

The first school includes—among other works—*Tarikh al-Sudan al-qadim wa al-hadith wa jughrafiyatuhu (The ancient and modern history and the geography of the Sudan)* by Naum Shuqair (1903), *Al-Sudan 'abr al-qurun (The Sudan through the centuries)* by Makki Shibayka (1947), *Ma'allim tarikh*

al-Sudan wa Wadi al-Nil (An outline history of the Nile Valley and Sudan) by al-Shatir Busaili Abd al-Jalil (1955), *A history of Sudan to 1821* by A.J. Arkell (1961), and *Modern history of the Sudan* by P.M. Holt (1963). Almost without exception, the above mentioned historians treated Sudan in the Middle Ages either as a cultural outpost of Coptic Egypt or merely as an arena of the Arabs and Muslims. There is scant reference to the socioeconomic and political organization of the mediaeval kingdoms, or to indigenous patterns of cultural behaviour.

These works are not without value and insight, and do not justify treating mediaeval Nubia as a culturally unimportant era in Sudanese history. It would appear that in the study of mediaeval Nubia, what is lacking is not so much historical facts as a coherent point of view around which to arrange the known facts. The failure of these histories to measure the magnitude of the phenomenon of the mediaeval civilization results from the mode of inquiry which historical research has always followed.

The second school of thought about mediaeval studies is largely connected with Fung history. Three groups of authors fall within this category.

1. The Arab-Oriented Historians

This historical tradition is represented in the *A history of the Arabs in the Sudan* by MacMichael (1922), *Al-Islam wa al-Nuba fi al-'usur al-wusta (Islam and Nubia in the Middle Ages)* by Mus'ad (1960), *The Arabs and the Sudan* by Yusuf Hasan (1967), *Al-Funj wa al-ard (The Fung and the land)* by Abu Salim (1967). MacMichael's work, which has been the baseline for subsequent historical studies in this tradition, is essentially a genealogical work combining historical information about various Arab tribes during the last 400 years or so. Following the same line of inquiry, Hasan has traced the penetration of the Arabs into northern, eastern and central Sudan, emphasizing the political and economic aspects. Collectively, these historians have treated the history of the mediaeval period through the eyes of the Arabs in the Sudan. It is characteristic of these histories to attribute to the Arabs both an immediate impact (the decline and the fall of the mediaeval kingdoms) and a long-term cultural impact, namely the Arabization and the Islamization of the country.

This outlook is based on the a priori assumption that the Sudan is a part of the Arab world, and therefore its history should be treated from the Arab perspective. Thus, the emphasis of historical investigation of this school of thought has been placed upon the immigrant Arabs to the exclusion of the indigenous cultural patterns. Strangely enough, these authors have paid little attention to the descriptive evidence of the Arab writers about the country and its peoples. In this frame of reference, it is

important to realize that the interest of these historians in Alwa was merely as the predecessor of the Fung sultanate. Thus, these scholars have been preoccupied with the latter days of the Alwan kingdom, directing their investigations to the question of what befell Alwa. Although the ultimate fate of Alwa is uncertain, the Fung Chronicle, a manuscript history of the Fung, has been taken as a main source for the demise of Soba, in A.D. 1504. However, it is now believed that there is no reference to the historical legend of Fung participation in the actual downfall of Alwa. Holt (1960) maintains that the historical sources, owing to the misunderstandings by the chroniclers, conceal the fact that the Abdallab (which denotes both the tribe and the political organization of the northern provinces of the Fung sultanate and its the regional capital, Qerri) first overthrew Soba at an uncertain date prior to the arrival of the Fung at the beginning of the sixteenth century A.D.

2. *The African-Oriented Historians*

The founder of this historical approach is J.L. Spaulding. His works *Kings of sun and shadow* (1971), *Kingdoms of the Sudan,* the latter co-authored with O'Fahey (1974), and other articles, opened a new perspective in the study of the history of the Sudan in general, and of the Fung sultanate and/or the mediaeval period in particular. Spaulding was the first to recognize the importance of both archaeological and ethnographic data as vital sources of information. This enabled him to examine the internal dynamics of development within the Sudan itself. Though Spaulding's main contribution has been in the field of Fung cultural history (sixteenth to nineteenth centuries A.D.), his approach, which was based on the assumption of cultural continuity, led him to the investigation of the latter phase of Alwa. Accordingly, he addressed himself to the question of what became of the kingdom of Alwa after the fall of its capital, Soba, and the Fung conquest, but from a quite different perspective than that held by the Arab-oriented historians.

In his paper entitled "The Fate of Alodia" (1974), Spaulding argued that the kingdom of Alwa and its people, whom he designated the Anag, or Hamag, did not vanish abruptly after the collapse of Soba, but flourished in the form of the kingdom of Fazughli. This kingdom, according to Spaulding, was founded by the Hamag of Alwa who fled, by the sixteenth century A.D., to the area near the modern Ethiopian–Sudanese frontier. The Fazughli kingdom was considered by Spaulding to be an offspring of the kingdom of Alwa, and included the entire geographical region in which the Prenilotes are found today. Spaulding uses the term "Prenilotes" to refer to the following Eastern Sudanic speaking peoples: Koma, Gumuz, Berta, Mao, etc.) (see Map III). By the close of the seventeenth century, the Fazughli kingdom was conquered

by the Fung and added to their territory. From that time onwards, Fazughli became one of the main provinces of Sennar, and the Anag, or the Hamag, became one of the major ethnic groups of the Fung sultanate that guided the destiny of Sennar (Spaulding, 1974).

Central to Spaulding's hypothesis was the notion of substantial historical, ecological and linguistic continuities between the Meroitic, Fazughli and Fung eras. Along these lines, Spaulding assumed the existence of significant similarities between the Sennar government and that of mediaeval Nubia or, for that matter, of the Meroitic civilization. Following the basic tenets of his cultural continuity hypothesis, Spaulding was convinced that Sennar was a typical Sudanic kingdom and hence represented a Nubian renaissance.

This led Spaulding to the question of the identity of the kingdom of Alwa. The Fazughli tradition, which was preserved by the Hamag (including a matrilineal system somewhat modified by Islam), together with the use by the Fung sultans of certain terms such as *makk* and *garmal*, which seem to be derived from the Meroitic terms *mk* ("God") and *oore* ("sovereign") respectively, may indicate that "Mediaeval Alwa, like its offspring Fazughli was a polyethnic but predominantly Prenilotic state" (Spaulding, 1974:34). He held that both the epigraphical and literary evidence, which referred to Alwa as a Nubian entity, cannot stand up against the testimony of the later history of the Alwan successor state of Fazughli, and that the language of Alwa seems to have been Meroitic.

The fact that Alwa was a Nubian entity is attested by the graffiti on sherds found at Soba, which were written in the Old Nubian language (Shinnie, 1955a). Further linguistic evidence is found in the word *soba* itself, which seems to be of Nubian origin. According to Monneret de Villard, the word *soba* may be connected with the Mahas word *sobe* and the Kenz word *sobe* meaning "walls" (Crawford, 1951). However, Crawford preferred to interpret *soba* as referring to "old walls" or "ruins" rather than a city wall, because he considered Soba an ancient Meroitic site (Crawford, 1951, 26). The modern Nubian word *sobe* means "a pile of mud." However, *sobe* is different from the more common word *arki* which means "plain mud." *Sobe* is building mud and/or mud which has been used for building. Therefore, *sobe* is "building mud in ruins." This interpretation makes Crawford's meaning more acceptable (Osman, pers. comm.).

It is evident that Alwa was inhabited by a conglomeration of ethnic groups, and although linguistic relationships may be expected to yield inferential information useful in solving the historical problem, the linguistic focus is still only one avenue of inquiry. The answers to vital questions about cultural history must rest upon the analysis of the full range of available data. Some of the cultural elements (e.g. the horned

crown of the Christian Nubian kings, which seems to be a heritage from the Meroitic insignia, and the Nubian matrilineal system, which seems to have been a continuation of a basic social pattern of Nubian culture) are not diagnostic. They can in fact be traced as far back as Meroitic times, if not indeed as far back as the earlier C-Group and Kerma cultures.

The problem of ethnicity has been, and still is, one of the main controversial issues facing students of Sudanese cultural history. Such terms as "X-Group," "Kushite/Meroites," "Nubia/Nuba," "Fung/Hamag/Anag," and "Nilotic" have been applied in different ways at different times by different authors, seldom with any clear definition. It has been assumed that the terms represent distinct ethnic territorial or political groupings. This attempt to attribute an all-embracing character to the pattern of the dominant social mode, to the exclusion of the divergent social elements it must include, is perhaps the most common pitfall of ethnohistorical research in Africa.

3. *The Church-Oriented Historians*

This approach is seen in: "Christianity in the Soudan," an article by L.M. Butcher (1899); "Christianity in Nubia: A Reassessment," a paper by L.M. Pirouet (1971); and in Father J. Vantini's works, *The excavation at Faras* (1970) and *Tarikh al-masihiyya fi al-mamalik al-Nubiya al-qadima wa al-Sudan al-hadith* (1978) which present the best illustration of the approach under consideration. Vantini, who is the most prominent member of this group, demonstrated that the history of Nubian Christianity is a part of the whole history of the Sudan. He maintained that since Nubia was once a part of the world Christian community, its history should be studied within the context of a Christian perspective. Vantini's excavation at Faras, with the Polish expedition, together with his position as a well-informed religious leader about the history of Christianity in the Near East, adds to his credibility. In addition, Vantini is in charge of present missionary activity in the Sudan. Results of his excavation at Faras, in the early 1960s, are beginning to modify the picture of the mediaeval period being rapidly overcome by Islam, and suggests the co-existence of the two religions over a period of centuries. He is of the opinion that the Nubian Church had a long and interesting history which continued more than a thousand years and is fully as worthy of investigation as the Coptic or other churches.

Vantini's work, which is concerned with a strictly defined part of Nubia, particularly Faras, in fact makes very little mention of the kingdom of Alwa. Even in Nubia proper, Vantini has focused his attention on art history, as exemplified in painting, ceramics, sculpture, and the architecture of the churches in Faras. He has devoted most of his synthesis to the description of the style and themes of the many art

works. He had also concentrated on the history of the bishops and the character of Nubian Christianity.

A major point in Vantini's analysis is the notion that Christianity in Nubia was not merely a court religion. Like Islam after it, Christianity was first introduced to Nubia through a gradual process. Its long existence in Nubia has been supported by some surviving cultural practices which are not Islamic in character, and which are of Christian origin (for these practices see Crowfoot, 1918; Crossland, 1918; MacMichael, 1920; and Vantini, 1978).

E. The Nubianists (Archaeologists)

The early growth of Nubiology and Sudanology (as referred to by some) was conditioned by two main schools of thought, referred to by Osman (1981) as the Egyptological School and the Antiquarian School. They developed simultaneously in the northern and central parts of the Sudan respectively. The first school, which was largely the product of salvage operations in connection with the building, and the subsequent heightening, of the Aswan Dam, strongly emphasized monumental archaeology in the Sudan (Osman, 1981:9). The other school, which seemed not to have been affected by the practical circumstances which stimulated the growth of the first school, had its origin in the establishment of the Sudan Antiquities Service in 1905. Its development, according to Osman, "was based on the realization of the importance of public opinion to archaeology, the urgent need for trained Sudanese archaeologists and the importance of archaeological publications" (Osman, 1981:14). The Antiquities Service greatly encouraged archaeological work in the Sudan. Along with the Antiquities Service, the Department of Archaeology, at the University of Khartoum, is now undertaking the task of field investigation, data collection, and student training.

The distinction between the schools of thought, as maintained by Osman, seems to correspond closely to the present dichotomy of mediaeval Nubian studies, i.e. an emphasis on monuments vs. a more generic approach. A line can be drawn between those who study mediaeval Nubia as seen from the north, i.e. Nubia proper, and those who considered Alwa (southern Nubia) as an entity in its own right and not merely as a part of mediaeval Nubia.

In the following section, the past seventy years or so of mediaeval Nubian studies will be reviewed, with special reference to the kingdom of Alwa. The series of research strategies at various periods during the present century will be identified. On the basis of research strategies, mediaeval Nubian studies can be classified in terms of three main phases. These tentative phases, which seem to have had a marked correlation

with the interpretation of mediaeval Nubian civilization, will be treated briefly.

Phase I is associated with the work of W. Budge, who wrote the first synthesis entitled *The Egyptian Sudan: its history and monuments* (2 vols.) in 1907. While Budge's work now seems dated, it was the first attempt to throw some light on the monumental remains of the Kingdom of Alwa (see Chapter 2). His preoccupation with the grandiose (which even appears in the title of his book) suggests that his involvement in Nubia was essentially a by-product of his primary commitment to Egypt and its civilization. It is almost inevitable that he should have viewed Nubian history chiefly as a reflection of events and conditions in Egypt. To quote Budge:

> Many archaeologists have imagined that we shall find in the Sudan the ruins of purely native buildings and monuments which will enable them to reconstruct a connected history of the country, but none of the surveys and explorations which have been made by ancient and modern travellers have resulted in the finding of any remains which are not in fact the works of foreigners. (Budge, 1907:511-12).

Phase II of mediaeval Nubian studies was connected with the First Archaeological Survey of Nubia under the directorship of the late G. Reisner in the period 1907 to 1911. The efforts of Reisner (1910), who was considered the father of Nubiology, were directed toward the rescue of the ancient remains that were to be destroyed by the waters of the heightened reservoir. Two particular lines of research were pertinent to mediaeval studies: architecture and linguistics. The first was largely the work of Mileham, who was attached to the University of Pennsylvania Expedition. Mileham (1910) made a detailed study of the early Christian buildings from different sites in the area between the First and Second Cataracts. The architect, S. Clarke, carried out a survey of the Christian remains between Khartoum and Cairo. Clarke visited the site of Soba in 1910. In his book, *Christian antiquities in the Nile Valley* (1912), Clarke drew up a conjectural plan of the church at Soba on the basis of the existing columns (see Chapter 2). He also excavated in the hope of finding remains of the walls but without success. These works are considered the first significant contribution to the archaeology and the art of mediaeval Nubia.

In the field of linguistics, the contribution of F.L. Griffith, who headed the Oxford Expedition, was perhaps the most important, in particular his analysis of the Old Nubian language spoken in the central Sudan. From the few Old Nubian graffiti which have been found in Soba and the Island of Meroe, Griffith suggested that these may represent a different dialect from that which is found in the extensive manuscript

material from the northern part of the Sudan (Griffith, 1913:5). These studies contained (so far as has been ascertained) the first observations regarding the linguistic affiliation of the kingdom of Alwa. Apart from these studies, the contribution of this phase to the early history of the Sudan in general, and of mediaeval Nubia in particular, was largely conditioned by the tendency to place more emphasis upon the investigation of mortuary remains. Consequently, relatively little was done with respect to the archaeology of mediaeval Nubia, and nothing of interest regarding Alwa emerged. Not only that, this phase, which may be called "the mortuary phase," has profoundly influenced our understanding of Sudanese cultural history down to the present day because it set the stage for an Egyptologically oriented school of archaeological data interpretation and cultural explanation. Often, as in Egyptology, interest in monumental buildings has tended to stunt investigation of the culture as a whole. In this respect, this phase can be considered largely as a continuation of the previous one.

Phase III encompasses the archaeological explorations connected to the Second Archaeological Survey of Nubia (1929-1934), and the many archaeological discoveries of the Nubian Campaign organized under the auspices of UNESCO in 1959 to 1966 to explore the ground that was to be flooded by the Nile waters above the Aswan High Dam. In essence, this phase reflects the present state of mediaeval Nubian cultural history. For the first time, attention was drawn to studying the many interrelated aspects of mediaeval Nubian civilization. A large corpus of data generated new ideas that were to stimulate the development of Nubiology.

The first modern attempt at synthesizing the cultural history of mediaeval Nubia began with Crowfoot, in a paper entitled "Christian Nubia" (1927) in which he touched briefly on some customs and practices which have survived the decline of Christianity in Nuba. His investigation was largely confined to the area of Dongola which assumed cultural continuity from Meroitic times to the present. The main significance of this attempt, for us now, lies in its anthropological perspective which seems to have been the first in the field of mediaeval Nubian studies. As part of the 1929 to 1934 salvage campaign, Monneret de Villard undertook an exhaustive survey of both literary and archaeological material pertaining to mediaeval Nubia, resulting in the four volume: *La Nubia medioevale* (1935-57). This was the first work that dealt with the origins of Christianity in Nubia, the relationship between the Arabs and the Nubians, and the fall of the Christian monarch(s) in Nubia. In spite of subsequent discoveries, *La Nubia medioevale* remains the basic reference for the study of mediaeval Nubian archaeology and history.

In the early fifties, the Sudan Antiquities Service carried out two important excavations at Soba and Ghazali under the directorship of P.L.

Shinnie. The former remains the only serious attempt to explore the cultural problems of Alwa (see below). These excavations, combined with earlier information, constituted the basis for Shinnie's work *Mediaeval Nubia* (1954b). All these works, which took place prior to the Nubian Campaign of the late 1950s, represent the pioneer attempts to provide a general picture of the culture life of mediaeval Nubia.

The UNESCO project resulted in a more insightful look into the nature of the mediaeval civilization. As a result of the new information obtained from extensive archaeological explorations, there emerged a recognition of the need for detailed studies concerning the many interrelated aspects of mediaeval Nubian culture history. This is seen in the work of W. Y. Adams, whose studies represent a real breakthrough in the cultural history of mediaeval Nubia. Adams' systematic studies of both domestic and ecclesiastical architecture, together with Nubian pottery, enabled him to establish a tentative developmental typology, or sequence, for the mediaeval Nubian cultural phases. These developmental stages, which are applicable only to Lower Nubia, consist of four main periods: Early Christian (A.D. 550-850), Classical Christian (A.D. 850-1050), Late Christian (A.D. 1050-1350), and Terminal Christian (A.D. 1350-1500) (Adams, 1964).

In addition to Adams' major contribution in the field of mediaeval Nubian studies, the Polish Expedition, headed by the archaeologist Michalowski, from 1961 to 1966, contributed to the study of the nature of Nubian art and architecture, as exemplified in Faras. Another general contribution to a diversified field of mediaeval Nubian studies is seen in the many articles written in different languages. Among them, mention can be made of the work of: Crawford (1961); the later work of Shinnie (1965, 1971, 1978); Säve-Söderbergh (1970); Trigger (1970); Haycock (1972); and Plumley (1975), among many others.

The tremendous efforts that were devoted to the study of mediaeval Nubia, as a result of the UNESCO project, did not stop at the end of the salvage operations. Having as their nucleus the Department of Archaeology, at the University of Khartom, mediaeval Nubian studies have continued to the present. This ongoing research is represented by the work of Osman (1973, 1978). In his pioneer study of economy and trade in mediaeval Nubia, Osman provided a succinct overview of the problems of terminology, and the geographical as well as the cultural definition of historic Nubia. He also pointed out the cultural characteristics pertaining to the period under consideration. While Osman's main concern was the kingdom of Dongola in the north, his study shed light on the variation in the ecological setting between the kingdoms of Alwa and Dongola.

The interpretation of Sudanese cultural history in general, and of mediaeval Nubia in particular, has been characterized by three contrasting research orientations:

1. Nubia as a Backwater of Egypt

This view has its inspiration in the early investigations in which the whole history of the Sudan was regarded as a branch of Egyptology. This idea stems from Reisner's discoveries, and the conclusions drawn from them at the beginning of the First Archaeological Survey of Nubia. This view was adopted by the participants of the Second Archaeological Survey of Nubia, under the directorship of Emery and Kirwan. Consequently, mediaeval Nubia was considered as a cultural outpost of Coptic Egypt, or, at best, a Roman frontier province. Diagnostic of this view was the preoccupation with isolated cultural items. In turn, this revealed an incomplete and one-sided picture of the nearly thousand years of mediaeval Nubian cultural adaptation. This approach, which prevailed until at least the early 1960s seemed to ignore the fact that similar elements in two cultures may be integrated into very different sociocultural systems. Distinctive configurations may result both from local adaptation and from historical development through different periods. Cultural differences and similarities cannot be understood if they are looked upon merely as isolated entities. No culture has ever existed in isolation. Yet the idea that contact between cultures is a commonplace phenomenon does not justify the orientation of research towards the study of similarities alone.

2. Nubia as a Cultural Entity

This view was pioneered by the American anthropologist W. Y. Adams (1967, 1977), who has made the cultural history of Nubia an object of extensive research. His general studies, based on evolutionary models, gave us the developmental stages, or periods, of mediaeval Nubian cultural history alluded to earlier. The elements which he used to formulate his chronological scheme of cultural development are settlement patterns, houses, churches, and pottery. These represent the technical aspects of the culture, but not the ideological aspects. As such, they do not provide very much insight into the integrating processes involved in cultural change.

While Adams advocated an evolutionary perspective for explaining the cultural dynamics operating in the Nubian cultural systems, he was obliged to consider the factor of diffusion as a major mechanism of cultural change. In his paper entitled "Continuity and Change in Nubian Cultural History" (1967), in which he attempted to explain cultural development from the Old Stone Age to Islam, Adams argued in favour

of the existence of two main currents operating in the history of Nubia. These were the Egyptian/Mediterranean current and the African current. He described the first as dynamic, and therefore capable of cultural change, and the other as static, and hence leading to stagnation. It would thus appear that Adams' evolutionism is akin to the diffusionism doctrine of the Egyptological models. If the earlier scholars have attributed cultural change in Nubia to the coming of new cultural ideas, it seems unlikely that the Nubian cultural tradition would have survived through the ages solely by the infusions of the "civilized" Mediterranean current. Ultimately, this view has to be seen as containing an element of Mediterranean bias or even ethnocentrism.

3. Nubia from Within

The proponent of this approach is A. Osman. Central to Osman's approach was the assumption of substantial cultural and linguistic persistence between modern and mediaeval Nubia. Superficially, this view seems to be similar to the ideas of Adams expressed in "Continuity and Change in Nubian Cultural History" (1967). Yet it differs from it on a number of important points. In his thesis entitled *The economy and trade of mediaeval Nubia* (1978), Osman sought, for the first time, to examine the internal cultural dynamics of Nubia. Realizing the significance of internal mechanisms as important means of cultural change and development, Osman adopted the strategy of reconstructing past human behaviour by studying the present cultural adaptation in the region. This approach, which emphasizes consideration of archaeological, historical and ethnohistorical evidence, together with present-day cultural practices among the Nubians, led Osman to the demonstration of significant functional linkages between material culture and society, so as to make it logically plausible to infer the one from the other.

Had he followed the orthodox assumptions of earlier studies, Osman might not have been able to recognize the importance of economy, mode of production, subsistence technology, and trade as agencies of cultural change. Osman's work also attempted to provide a model of the internal dynamics operating within a definable temporal-spatial dimension. He also pointed out the general characteristics and the complexity exhibited in the mediaeval period and demonstrated the importance of adopting a broader outlook on data retrieval. The utility of this model may not only be limited to northern Nubia, i.e. the kingdom of Dongola. Yet in southern Nubia, i.e. the kingdom of Alwa, its operationalization will, by necessity, require the consideration of other variables.

To understand the cultural complexity of Alwa, it is necessary to take a wider look at mediaeval Nubia despite the hazard of over-generalization that this raises. Mediaeval Nubia was not homogeneous. Rather, it

was a composite, different parts of which probably played different roles in its cultural process. While the kingdom of Dongola had a fixed ethnic identity (i.e. the Nubians, who, to the present, depend mainly on the cultivation of a narrow strip along the Nile), Alwa had a diversity of ethnic groupings.

In summing up this part of the study, it is evident that the investigations of the UNESCO Campaign resulted in a major advance in the study of the mediaeval period, although it was regrettably oriented to the extreme north of the Sudan i.e. Lower Nubia, while the history of Alwa (with the exception of the trial excavations of Shinnie examined in Chapter 2) remains a neglected chapter in mediaeval Nubian studies.

Future works should look for differences, as well as similarities, between the kingdoms of Alwa and Dongola, because of the clear and distinct differences in their geographical setting, economy, and ethnic composition. Significant differences are seen in the climate, soil, topography, drainage, and vegetation. While the kingdom of Dongola may be referred to as being ecologically bound by narrow constraints, Alwan culture was the result of the interaction of a wide variety of factors. With such diversity in its basic natural resources, it is not surprising that the kingdom of Alwa was generally more economically successful and more densely populated than Dongola.

Sudanese culture, which is no doubt a survival of an earlier and deeply rooted cultural tradition, is an excellent example of cultural variability. Any tradition can co-exist with others; and variations, or sub-traditions, can exist within any given tradition. It is in this perspective that the tradition concept, as well as the concept of the patterns (rather than the pattern) of culture, will provide the framework for considering the range of variation exhibited in the period under investigation.

2 / *The Archaeological Record*

THERE HAS BEEN NO systematic archaeological exploration in the former heartland of the kingdom of Alwa. This lack of field investigation and data recovery is also reflected in studies pertaining to the Meroitic and Fung eras. Most of the information is derived from the accounts of nineteenth-century travellers and scholars. There are also accounts of short journeys and reports concerning individual archaeological sites—most of which are accidental discoveries. Furthermore, although scientific excavations of key sites were carried out, either these excavations were never brought to a conclusion or the final definitive accounts never appeared. One such site is Soba (Shinnie, 1955a), the capital of the kingdom of Alwa, whose archaeological data will be examined in this chapter together with other known sites.

A. The Post-Meroitic or the Late Meroitic Period in Central Sudan

Before dealing with the archaeology of the kingdom of Alwa, the known evidence pertaining to the period known as the post-Meroitic and/or Late Meroitic will be discussed. It is important to note that very few details are known of the political developments in the period between the fall of Meroe and the rise of the kingdom of Alwa some two centuries later. What is clear is that the second and third centuries A.D. constituted a period of social upheaval and migration in the central Sudan area, during the course of which the Meroitic power in Upper Nubia was ultimately submerged. This impression emerges from two sources of information: historical and archaeological. The value of the former is somewhat limited by the difficulties in the interpretation of events, places, and groups and their precise location in both time and space. Similarly, the archaeological evidence is not overly enlightening. The only archaeological evidence available, to date, is restricted to mound graves confined to the area between Sennar in the south and Tanqasi in the north. These *tumuli* ("mound graves"), which are generally similar to those of Ballana (X-group) culture in the extreme north of the Sudan, are described by Chittick as follows:

> Mound graves are to be found over very extensive areas of the central and northern Sudan, but they are nowhere so plentiful as on the east bank of the Nile in the Khartoum region, and northwards at least as far as El Metemma. They mostly lie in groups of varying size, just away from the cultivated land, on the first rise of the gravel desert. Great and small (some are barely perceptible hummocks) their total number must run into many thousands. The surface of the mound is usually of gravel, presenting much the same appearance as the land round about; but where stone is available close by they are often covered with small boulders. Chronologically, they are usually assigned to that period, of which so little is known, immediately following the disappearance of the Meroitic kingdom. The graves would thus be contemporary with the "X-Group" culture further north; they have been guessed to have been made by the "Noba" referred to by Ezana of Axum as being in possession of the area when his forces passed through. (Chittick, 1957:73)

The excavation of some of these mounds has led to different and somewhat confusing terminologies or designations. Thus, the period is known variously as post-Meroitic (Bentley and Crowfoot, 1924), Tanqasi culture (Trigger, 1965), sub-Meroitic (Haycock, 1967), and the Late Meroitic or Bauda culture (Hakem, 1979). These terms designate the cultural horizon that arose on the ruins of the Meroitic power, having as its diagnostic feature a type of pottery known as Alwa (Alua) ware—the distinctive handmade pottery which has been found in some of the excavated graves. While the attributes of Alwa ware have not yet been established with certainty, it is possible to describe the characteristic features of this period from which the word "Alwa" has come to denote a certain pottery tradition.

The earliest known examples of mound graves in central Sudan are those found in the common (i.e., non-royal) cemeteries of Meroe excavated by Garstang in 1909-1910 (Garstang, 1911). Although there has been considerable debate over the proper chronological ordering of these graves, the main ceramic type found in the tombs was a handmade ware with a long narrow neck, above a large bulbous body; a type of pottery common in the Sudan from this period onwards and still made in many parts of the central and western Sudan (Shinnie, 1955b:83). The introduction of this pottery type for the first time at Meroe is interpreted by Kirwan (1939:42) as indicating the arrival of the Noba. This view has received apparent acceptance by a number of scholars including Monneret de Villard (1938), Shinnie (1954a), Trigger (1965), and Hintze (1968) among many others.

In view of the similarity of this pottery to that of the modern Noba Mountains in Kordofan and the Tama of Darfur, the pottery dubbed Alwa (Alua) ware would seem to have been ancestral to some of the wares that are associated with Alwa, the Nubian-speaking Christian kingdom which flourished in the Khartoum region until about the sixteenth

century A.D. (Bentley and Crowfoot, 1924:27; Trigger, 1965:136). It has been argued that this group of pottery, which is obviously related in form, function, and the process of manufacture, and which is quite distinct from the common Meroitic ware, has been reported from different localities in central and northern Sudan. Apart from Meroe, the pottery is attested from a few excavated burial mounds at Sennar (Addison, 1935), Ushara (Marshall and Adam, 1953), Tanqasi (Shinnie, 1954a), Khartoum (Arkell, 1949), Musuwwarat es Sufra (Hintze, 1968), Naga, Geili and Kadero (Ahmed, pers. comm.), Sarurab (Hakem, 1979), Shendi, Abu Haraz and Wad al Haddad (Crowfoot, 1925), and Hobagi (Chittick, 1957). Since the contents of the excavated mounds appear to be more or less similar, and conform to the so-called Alwa ware, a detailed look at some of the reported mounds is warranted.

Ushara. The site lies on the west bank of the White Nile, 5.6 km south of Khartoum (see Map IV). The excavated mound consists of two extended burials oriented in an east-west position (Marshall and Adam, 1953:40). No grave goods were found with these burials. Below these two graves, a contracted skeleton was found in a circular grave lying in a crouched position, on its right side, facing the north-north-east. Associated with this grave were a number of complete pots, "beer jars," similar to those found at Meroe, together with beads of faience, carnelian and glass, as well as single-barbed iron arrowheads. In view of the presence of so-called Alwa ware, the grave is dated somewhere between A.D. 270 and 350 (Marshall and Adam, 1953:46).

Sarurab. The site lies on the west bank of the Nile about 40 km north of Khartoum (see Map V). The largest known mound in the Sarurab group is 40 m in diameter and about 8 m high. Some of the Sarurab mounds were encircled by a low rough masonry enclosure. However, the excavation of some 150 mounds revealed that, although the mounds are extremely similar to those of Tanqasi, Ushara, and Ballana, there are varying burial customs evident within the mounds (Hakem, 1979). Some contained contracted burials while others revealed extended ones, as in the case of Ushara. Others again were crouched. There are also some mounds with only one burial chamber, and yet others with a circular or oval pit. Associated with the contracted burials were beads, iron implements, and Alwa ware pots similar to those at Ushara.

Hobagi. The site lies west of the Nile about 128 km north of Khartoum. The graves are thought to be similar to the *tumulus* graves of Ushara which were related to the Noba (Chittick, 1957). Unlike those of Ushara, but similar to Sarurab, some of the Hobagi mounds are encircled by low stone rings. They vary between 2 and 3.5 m in height, and 30 and 40 m in diameter. The discovery of these masonry enclosures within some mounds tempted Chittick to propose that they belonged to chiefs, or

meks, of the same people to whom the simple, unenclosed mound graves belonged (Chittick, 1957:74).

Musawwarat al-Sufra. This site lies in the Butana region about 32 km southeast of Shendi (see Map V). A total of eight graves were excavated by Hintze (1968). The graves were circular, having a side niche oriented north-south with the entrance on the east usually closed by stone blocks. Although all were plundered, the body in each grave was found to lie in a contracted position on the right side, head to the south, and looking toward the east. The grave goods comprised handmade globular jars with mat impressed decoration. On the basis of the presence of this pottery type, the cemetery was given the date between the mid-fourth to seventh centuries A.D. by Hintze, who stated that "the burials are clearly post-Meroitic, and are best described as 'Noba' graves" (Hintze, 1968:197).

Tanqasi. The site lies on the west bank of the Nile in the vicinity of Karima district (see Map I). It comprises some 200 mounds, varying from 2 to 10 m in height. Only two mounds were excavated by Shinnie. The substructure beneath one of the largest excavated mounds proved to be a large square pit, in the bottom of which four rectangular graves were sunk. Three of these had apparently never been used; the burial in the fourth was so thoroughly plundered that little remained of it. The substructure of the other mound, which had escaped plundering, was a side-niche grave of a type common both in the Meroitic and in the Ballana (X-Group) cultures. It contained a contracted burial accompanied by four Alwa ware pots, a number of beads of glass, carnelian stone and faience, and two silver rings (Shinnie, 1954a:73). Shinnie maintained that:

> The material from the burials is all of known type, already approximately dated; the pottery, of coarse mat impressed beer pot type, is very similar to that of the late burials found by Garstang at Meroe. . . . The excavation at Ushara also produced pottery of similar type. There seems no doubt that this class of pottery must be dated to the very end of Meroitic times and I have suggested . . . that it is the pottery of the black Nuba of the Aezanes inscription, in whom I see the probable destroyers of Meroe. On this argument, the pottery must belong to the end of the third and beginning of the fourth centuries A.D. . . . The other approximately datable objects from the Tanqasi graves are the quartz droplet beads. These are normally considered to be characteristic of the X-Group. . . . They cannot, however, be taken as direct evidence of X-Group date, since they occur also in the earlier contexts at Faras, where Griffith considers them to range from the beginning of the first century B.C. to the end of the second century A.D. It is clear then, that their real time runs from the first century B.C. to the fifth century A.D. . . . The pottery and type of burial, however, enable a rather closer dating to be given. It is accepted that the mounds at Meroe itself are unlikely to be earlier than the middle of the third century A.D. . . . This is a rather hazardous hypothesis at this stage, since there was a much older tradition in the

> Sudan of mound burial, for example Kerma and other sites of similar date. It may be that this local burial custom persisted in more remote areas throughout the period of Pharaonic occupation and became common again after Egyptian influence had gone. (Shinnie, 1954a:83-84)

Alwa ware is best seen in the numerous narrow-necked globular "beer jars" decorated with textile impressions which have been found in various sites in central Sudan and are still made in the Nuba Mountains (Crowfoot, 1925). The resemblance of Alwa ware to modern Nuba pottery suggested by Bentley and Crowfoot (1924:27) seems to be of a very generalized and non-specific nature. At the present time very little is known about the geographical range of Alwa ware and its affinities with other handmade industries, whether of Meroitic or Alwan origin. Although this pottery has been considered by Bentley and Crowfoot (1924) and Trigger (1965) to have been ancestral to some of the wares that are associated with the Christian kingdom of Alwa, the attribution has not yet been established with certainty. Whether this pottery tradition, within the wide distribution of mound graves, represents a single cultural horizon or more than one is, as yet, unknown, especially as no settlement sites that can be associated with these cemeteries have been found. It is only after a detailed examination, as well as a topographical study and systematic classification of these tombs, that it will be possible to determine with certainty the affiliations of Alwa ware.

From the evidence cited thus far, it is apparent that Alwa ware is definitely post-Meroitic, and that its distribution is evidence of a major migration of Noba peoples to the Nile valley at the conclusion of the Meroitic period. Although the evidence cited points to a break in the continuity of pottery manufacture between the Meroitic and post-Meroitic periods, the arrival of the Noba in the Nile valley did not result in any substantial cultural changes. Though fashions in material objects change slowly—these changes being shown most clearly in the pottery—the general life of the country, the style of buildings, and the nature of the agricultural village life remained substantially the same. Evidence of continuity between Meroitic and post-Meroitic periods is found in the burial customs discussed above. The Ezana inscription suggests that the Noba adopted the Meroitic religion and the utilitarian traditions of the valley dwellers, to the extent that their graves were virtually indistinguishable from those of the Meroitic proletariat in any part of the empire.

In the absence of solid evidence bearing upon the history of this transitional period (from the Meroitic to Alwan culture), the broad picture of political development must be reconstructed through inference. The above examination of the excavated mounds revealed that they differed in size, complexity, and in terms of grave goods. This might suggest that some represented local nobilities. The ruins of an unknown number of dynasties that contended for power at this time may lie

beneath the thousands of unexplored mound graves. However, when the Christian monarchy arose in central Sudan before the middle of the sixth century A.D., its capital was at Soba, and not at any of the places where mound graves were excavated. And it is here that the search for the centralized power should take place.

In summarizing the known history of the period between the fall of Meroe and the rise of Alwa, it should be noted that the *tumuli* mentioned above have been designated as Tanqasi culture, after the mounds of Tanqasi (Trigger, 1965). Trigger assumed a cultural uniformity for the burial mounds that cover the area from Sennar to Tanqasi. He argued that it is preferable to name the culture after the type site at Tanqasi rather than to risk confusion with the culture of the later kingdom of Alwa, which no doubt developed from it (Trigger, 1965:136). Furthermore, Trigger asserted that:

> It is highly likely that the Nubian language was brought to the Khartoum region by the Nuba of Ezana who introduced the Tanqasi culture. . . . Although not all of Rouse's formal criteria for providing a migration have been met, the combined evidence of the Ezana inscription, of archaeology and of linguistics strongly supports a migration in the south which destroyed Meroe, [and] introduced a Nubian language to that part of the Nile Valley. (Trigger, 1965:137)

The earliest known reference to the Noba in the form of "Nubae" is attested during the second or third centuries B.C. in a passage from the geographer Eratosthenes, which was preserved by Strabo:

> The parts on the left side of the course of the Nile, in Libya, are inhabited by Nubae, a large tribe who, beginning at Meroe, extend as far as the bends of the river and are not subject to the Ethiopian but are divided into several separate Kingdoms. (Strabo, quoted in Adams, 1977)

In the middle of the second century A.D., Ptolemy's geography placed the Nubae both east and west of the Nile, that is partly within the Kushite dominions in the Butana steppe. Adams stated that the Noba, or Nubae, were long-time neighbours and former subjects of Meroe, and he suggested that they were related to the Nobadae, who occupied the northern part of the Sudan. He further proposed that the two peoples sprang from a common origin in the western or southwestern Sudan (Adams, 1977:424).

However, the later mention of the word "Nuba" (which seems to have had both ethnic and linguistic connotations) in the inscription of Ezana, around A.D. 350, suggested that the Noba had become a politically dominant group. This explains why the inscription was obliged to give them a name of their own. The political power of the Noba was later to become formalized in the name of the Christian kingdom of Alwa.

B. Soba

1. A Geographical Profile

Soba, considered to be the royal seat of the mediaeval kingdom of Alwa, is situated on the eastern bank of the Blue Nile, some 22 km south of Khartoum. The area in which the site is located is known locally as Soba Sharik (i.e., east). Soba is a fairly common place name. Soba Sharik comprises a number of villages both along the Blue Nile and further inland (see Map II).

The locality is flat, with minor natural undulations, rock outcrops being absent. It lies in the area of the Nubian sandstone formations (El Bushi, 1972:154) and is part of the western fringe of the extensive Gezira clay plain. The Gezira (the Arabic word for "island" or "peninsula") is a triangle of alluvial deposits enclosed between the Blue Nile and White Nile with its apex at Khartoum. The southern limit of the Gezira is not clearly identifiable, but the Sennar–Kosti railway line is considered as its arbitrary base (Tothill, 1946:152; Williams and Adamson, 1973:490). The Gezira seems to constitute the heartland of the kingdom of Alwa and has been, and will continue to be, the basis on which the prosperity of the Sudan rests.

The geological sequence of the Gezira is rather simple. The Basement Complex, the oldest rock of the Gezira, is overlain by the Nubian Sandstone Formation, then the Gezira Formation, and lastly by Holocene superficial deposits.

The Gezira Formation consists primarily of unconsolidated alluvial sediments. These sediments include silt, clay, sand, and gravel, usually interlocated and interbedded (El Bushi, 1972:156). The lithology of the Gezira Formation, according to Abdel Salam (1966), is variable. The thickness of the formation varies considerably from one location to another, and at Soba consists of 15 m of clay. The age of the formation is uncertain; the upper clay was considered by Whiteman (1971) to be of Pleistocene age. Its origin is still debatable; however, many scholars espouse a lake theory. This is supported by the presence of kankar and gypsum in many places within the Gezira Formation together with the formation of carbonates at al-Gerief and Soba (El Bushi, 1972:157). Evidence from sub-fossil mollusca, heavy minerals and clay mineralogy confirms that much of the Gezira clay was laid down by the early Holocene Blue Nile (Tothill, 1946:168; Williams and Adamson, 1973:506; Williams and Clark, 1976:50).

The most recent deposits are the Nile silts and wadi deposits. Nile silts are found along the Blue Nile banks and are deposited annually as a suspension load. Small sand dunes occur on both sides of the Blue Nile

and White Nile. Local sand and silt accumulate behind trees, shrubs, and other obstacles, especially to the east of the Blue Nile, i.e., in the Butana region.

The soils of the Soba locality can be broadly divided into two categories: those which lie adjacent to the east bank of the Blue Nile on the alluvial plain, and those which lie to the east of the Blue Nile at higher levels. The latter are designated as the gravel plateau with Butana savanna vegetation. The alluvial plains result from the Nile floods and are associated with the present flood plain, while the higher level soils are subject to erosion and deposition.

On the eastern side of the Blue Nile we find mainly high level dark soils which occur due to erosion and cultivation. These soils have a high salt content, calcium carbonate, and gypsum. They have affinities to the soils of the Gezira and are of two distinct soil groups: red, loamy sands and rather heavy brown soils. The latter, called *fuda*, are characterized by their loamy, friable nature (Worrall, 1959:36).

Soba has hot summers, with a rainy season from June to September, and warm, dry winters. The main annual rainfall is about 140 mm in Khartoum, but increases southwards. According to Obeid and Mahmoud (1969:135), most rain falls in brief, but heavy, rainstorms. Relative humidity values are low and reflect the general aridity of the climate.

The site is drained by Wadi Bent Bady and Wadi Soba. The channels of these wadis are recognizable by their scrub growth as well as their topographical features. In the rainy season, the water often overflows their banks and sheet flooding is common. Sources of water in the area are restricted to the Blue Nile and wells. Most of these wells are hand-dug and vary in depth from 9 to 30 m. The wells are found in several villages at Soba, such as Geina'ab, Umm Ushush, and Soba al-Taiyib. Artificial depressions, *hafirs*, are also found in the area where water is scarce, e.g., at Sheikh Al-Amin.

Direct precipitation is very low, but the area is characterized by the presence of an underground water reserve. The water table varies from 7 m near the banks of the Blue Nile to 14 m away from the river. At Soba, the water table is at 7 m (Obeid and Mahmoud, 1969:136).

The Soba locality is dissected by several small gulleys moving towards the Blue Nile, and many small *khors* cross the site. Clay and/or sandy clay with sheets of Nile pebbles characterize the surface of the site.

In regard to vegetation, Soba lies within the acacia desert scrub division (Andrews, 1948:35). It is a transitional zone between the acacia and seasonally flooded tall grassland to the south and the semi-desert scrub to the north. The vegetation is dominated by low bushes characteristic of the semi-arid regions, with a covering of short life-cycle grasses which grow during the rainy season. Acacia trees are spread over the area. The dominant species are sunt (*Acacia nilotica*) and sallam (*Acacia*

ehrenbergiana). Besides these species, kitr (*Acacia mellifora*) is also scattered along the shallow gullies that dissect the site. Usher (*Calotropis procera*) and la'ot (*Acacia nubica*) also grow near the bank of the Blue Nile and along the *khors*. Cultivated gardens stretch along the banks of the Blue Nile.

Although vegetation varies with rainfall, soil texture, and distance from the river, it should be noted that the area was once heavily vegetated. Extensive forests are known to have existed along both the Blue Nile and White Nile as early as the beginning of this century (Muriel, in Williams and Adamson, 1973:498). The decline of this forest zone reflects the prolonged and adverse influence of man exerted through fire, overgrazing, and wood collection. With the influx of people into this area following the advent of the Gezira Scheme in 1925, and the growth of Khartoum, the demand upon timber reserves for fuel, fencing, building, and forage have caused a drastic and continuing deterioration of the vegetation.

In addition, the site itself has been extensively disturbed by quarrying. Buildings, many of which had remained standing at Soba, were demolished in order to re-use the large, well-fired bricks. Stone blocks from the site provided material for the construction of Khartoum, with the result that much archaeological evidence has been lost forever. The quarrying of the site seems to have had a long history. Lepsius, in 1844, related that, landing at Soba, he found "great heaps of red bricks and stone destined for exportation" (Lepsius, quoted in Clarke, 1912:37).

2. *Site Description*

The site is some 2500 m to the northeast of Gainaab (see Map VI). The site is about 1500 m east-west, by 2500 m north-south at its widest point. This area represents what may be called the core of the site; however, the town of Soba was probably larger than this. Archaeological remains have been found at the village of Soba Sharik, 2 km beyond the southern limit of the site core. Soba's size is also reflected in the descriptions by the Arab geographers discussed in Chapter 1.

In addition to the small gullies that flow toward the Blue Nile, many tracks pass close to its eastern and western edges. The main canal of the Seliat Irrigation Scheme forms the northeastern limit of the site.

The area of the site is generally flat, but exhibits more than fifty mounds. These tend to form distinct units separated from each other by open spaces that have been presumed to be unoccupied areas. On the surface of some of the mounds, it is possible to detect traces of structures suggesting walls of buildings. The mounds are nowhere more than 2 or 3 m in height. Their diameter ranges between 30 and 60 m. Most of the mounds are located near shallow water courses.

The surface of the mounds is characterized by the presence of large amounts of fragmented red bricks. Indeed the occurrence of such large quantities of handmade bricks is a peculiarity of the Soba site. The fragments of red brick differ only in size from those found at other sites attributed to the same period in the Blue Nile valley. The size of the red bricks is known to vary between 40 × 20 × 5 cm and 34 × 18 × 46 cm. The choice of red bricks as a building material is probably due to the availability of water, mud and fuel, and the absence of rock. This material is still used in the area.

Some mounds are completely covered with badly fired broken red bricks amongst which it is difficult to find any complete specimens. This feature, particularly noticeable on the northwestern limit of the site, has given rise to the question of whether these mounds represent structural remains collapsed as a result of poor firing, or whether the original structures were built from waste bricks, as sometimes happens today. Waste brick is commonly used for secondary buildings, such as for outer walls, supporting pillars, lavatories, kitchens, huts, and corrals.

In addition to the broken red bricks, the surface of the mounds is littered with potsherds. In fact, potsherds are scattered all over the site, but in fairly small amounts between the mounds. Whether the distribution of these sherds in the open areas is a reflection of natural or human factors, or whether it represents an occupational activity, is beyond our present knowledge.

Apart from the above-mentioned surface finds, there is some scattered red ochre and sun-dried brick, as well as lithic materials, including grindstones, flakes and chipped pebbles of quartz, and pieces of Nubian sandstone. A concentration of blocks of Nubian sandstone is notable on the southern side of the site and may suggest the existence of some civic constructions attached to the town. Stone constructions are not uncommon at the site. One such construction comprises two linear features, 4 × 6 m in length, and 6 m apart, located a few meters south of Mound 8 (see Map VI). It extends east-west and the width of each feature is about 50 cm. Outside the core of the site, several stone constructions are scattered over a wide area in Soba Sharik, which lies 2 km south of the site. The axis was often west-east. Some of the stones in these structures were plastered in white. According to one local tradition, these are Christian graves. Skeletal remains are often found when building houses in the area (Zarroug, 1978).

However, the existence of stone structures is well-attested by the church (Mound 12 on Map VI). The building is 60 m long in the northeastern to southwestern direction, with a width of 30 m. Today, the church appears as a sandy gravel mound and the only visible features are the three standing but fragmented granite columns, rising to a height of about 1.4 m, with an inscribed capital lying between them. Five other

fragmented columns are also seen lying on the ground about the area of the church, but not where they would naturally have fallen.

From the brief description of the site presented here, it is apparent that the mounds are similar so far as surface finds are concerned. This statement may be taken as a guideline for identifying the contents of the site. Yet it must be borne in mind that surface finds vary for numerous reasons, including the soil chemistry and climatic conditions. In addition to these natural agents, the site has been modified by gravel digging and brick collecting. This means that the amount of precise information about the occupation and the cultural contents of the site that can be obtained from surface collection is limited.

3. Site Excavation

Excavations at Soba were begun as early as the beginning of the present century by E.A.W. Budge (1907) and S. Clarke (1912). Excavations by P.L. Shinnie (1955a) were undertaken in the years 1950 to 1952. They were, and remain, the only archaeological, as opposed to antiquarian, attempts to explore the historical problem of the kingdom of Alwa.

Before dealing with these excavations, it is interesting to note that the site was visited on several occasions by travellers and scholars whose finds were of some importance. Among them was Cailliaud (1826), who, in 1821, observed a ram figure, about 1.5 m in length, at the church. The ram was examined by Trémaux who, in 1848, enumerated the visible antiquities, including the church columns and the ram with its pedestal inscribed in Meroitic hieroglyphs (Griffith, 1911:51). It appears that the ram must have been covered up again, as Duemichen claimed to have excavated it in 1863 and published a drawing of it as well as the inscription. He added that the ram was found near the church (Shinnie, 1955a:17). Lepsius, who visited Soba in 1844, saw several antiquities that had been found at the site, the most important of which was a tombstone, inscribed on both sides in Old Nubian and dated to A.D. 897, and fragments of bronze vessels with similar lettering as well as classical statuettes of Venus, and a large granite figure of Osiris seated. With the exception of the latter finds, whose whereabouts are unknown, all of these finds are now in Berlin (Shinnie, 1955a:16).

Budge described his dig at the church as follows:

> We began to dig among the pillars near the east end of it. After clearing away a considerable amount of sand and earth, we found a number of mastabas, or rectangular benches, about three feet high built of mud, and they so much resembled in form the tombs of ecclesiastical officials which I had seen in the churches of monasteries in Mesopotamia that for me it was impossible not to regard them as tombs. We dug through two of them and found bodies at a depth of about two feet below the surface

> of the ground and the supposition was then proved to be correct. There was nothing found in the graves which served to indicate the period when they were made, but they appear to belong to the Christian period of Sudan history. On some of the pillars, the Coptic cross was cut and it was clear that we are digging among ruins of a building which had been used for Christian worship. We, of course, did not disturb the bodies, and we filled in the holes which we had made. We then went and examined the ruins of a stone gateway, which did not appear to be so old as the temple we had just left. (Budge, 1907:324-5).

It seems clear from this passage that Budge was mainly concerned with the art history and/or the monumental archaeology of Soba, that is, material of religious or mortuary significance, rather than other aspects of the culture. Even in this regard, Budge's attempt has uncovered little of interest concerning the nature of the church. This is not only because his excavations were far from being complete, but also because such types of structures are unlikely to yield a representative sample of the potential cultural material. Whatever the aims of his excavation, there was no mention either of the size or the plan of the Soba church.

Budge claimed that Soba was originally a Meroitic site, basing his argument on the carved stone ram of Meroitic origin mentioned above. The presence of Coptic crosses carved on the pillar of the church, as well as of small bronze crosses which he uncovered, led him to describe the Soba church as being the remains of an early Meroitic temple which had been subsequently turned into a Christian church by the Alwans. This supposition was adopted by Griffith, who examined the inscription, and suggested:

> the textual evidence which appears to consist of a name of a king with some epithets and a dedication to Amon with complimentary prayers, seemed to prove that there existed a temple of Amon at Soba as at Naga and Meroe, were similar rams lined the avenue to the temple of Amon. . . . At any rate, it is evident that the Christian Soba stood on the site of a pagan city. (Griffith, 1911:51-53)

It is apparent that these early investigators thought the ram found at the Soba church would have significant implications for the early history of the site. Yet it seems difficult to date the site with any certainty on the basis of the ram. It is not clear at all whether the ram was originally associated with a Meroitic temple built at Soba, or whether it was brought to the site at an unknown date. Although the metamorphosis of ancient temples into churches, and the latter into mosques, is well known in Sudanese history, the information regarding the Meroitic occupation of Soba is incomplete and, at best, wholly inferential. This does not mean that there was no Meroitic occupation or influence at the site, but before

touching on this issue, it is pertinent to consider the data recovered from the excavations by P.L. Shinnie.

Shinnie selected three mounds and the church for his trial excavations. The mounds are designated A, A1, and B (corresponding to the numbers 7, 8 and 3, respectively, on Map VI). These mounds are among the highest and the largest of the Soba complex and were chosen on the premise that they were most likely to provide a long chronology as well as a complete pottery sequence. The primary aim of these vertical excavations was to plumb the depths of the occupation deposits, discover the sequence of levels, and produce a sample of material remains. In fact, the mounds selected to meet the above objectives were not fully excavated.

The total extent of the first mound is about 3,200 m^2, and the excavated portion amounted to only 553 m^2. In the second mound, about 192 of the approximately 3,870 m^2 of the mound were uncovered. The excavated section of the third mound is about 0.5 percent of the total 56,160 m^2 area of the mound. The unearthed portion of the church is no more than 1,800 m^2. The following is a summary of the material remains and their cultural significances as interpreted by Shinnie (1955a).

4. *Architecture of the Site*

The excavated mounds reveal the existence of what was essentially domestic architecture. From the size, style, and material of construction, the architecture of Soba appears to be similar to the type of buildings still common in central Sudan. A total of six such structures constitute what we know of the architectural history of Soba.

The first mound (A or 7, on Map VI) consists of what seems to be three superimposed components. The nature of the upper unit was not clear. It overlies a construction of massive walls filled with rubble of both red and sun-dried bricks. Associated with this building, whose plan cannot be fully reconstructed, are two stone blocks on red brick packing. They were probably supports for uprights holding the roof. The most distinctive feature of the building is that the brick of the bottom course was laid on its edge, the remainder of the bonding being all in stretchers with an occasional course of headers. The arrangement of the brick in this fashion is known elsewhere in the Sudan. For example, it was found at Adams' excavations at the village of Meinarti in Lower Nubia, which was continuously inhabited for twelve centuries, from the Late Meroitic period through the Late Christian period (Adams, 1968b).

The best preserved and the largest structure in this mound was the lower unit. It consists of a number of rooms with outer walls which appear to be verandahs. Five such rooms, mostly of sun-dried brick smeared with mud plaster, were unearthed. The largest of these rooms provided the majority of the restorable pots from the whole site. Judging

from the quality of the pottery and the grain storage bins, Shinnie suggested that the structure, which appears to have been built at one time, may have been a domestic building, most probably a private house (Shinnie, 1955a:21). He also noted that the red bricks seem to have been laid so as to yield upper courses of the building that would be impervious to rain.

A somewhat similar construction comes from the second mound (A1 or 8). It is composed of a single building consisting of seven rooms, together with an entrance hall and another relatively small room. The latter, which may have been used as a kitchen (as indicated by the amount of ash found), was built outside the main structure. One of the largest rooms contains two beehive-shaped mud constructions. According to Shinnie, these might have been grain bins.

The building was constructed from sun-dried bricks, and the walls were built in alternate courses of headers and stretchers. The thresholds are of timber, as with contemporary houses of the region, and in most other parts of the Sudan. Evidence of various reconstructions and remodellings is seen in the additional walls. From the presence of the numerous glass beads and the coarse shards, together with the poor quality of the building, as indicated by the irregularity of the angles between the walls, Shinnie assigned the building to a later date, fifteenth or sixteenth century A.D.

The final record of the architecture of the site is provided by the third mound (B or 3), the largest of the Soba complex. The mound is made up of two buildings widely separated in time, as shown from the amount of rubble fill in the rooms of the lower level (Shinnie, 1955a:23). The upper structure consists of a single unit with a large central room measuring 10.5 × 9.5 m. Associated with this room are the remains of four pillars supporting the roof. The unit also includes a number of small rooms opening off the central one, all of which were built of red brick with smaller quantities of sun-dried brick. Two of the rooms, which have no apparent doorways, provide much of the well-preserved glass found at the site.

Like the upper unit, the walls of the lower building had been plastered with white mud. The building revealed the first known evidence of window plaster in Soba. The recovery of window glass embedded in the plaster, indicates the use of glass for this purpose. This building, which appears to have been constructed on a larger scale than the upper one, consists of an entrance, flanked by walls leading to a hall measuring 7.75 × 7.30 m. Surrounding this hall are a series of smaller rooms, few of which were excavated. Given the large scale and the comparatively elaborate entrance, this building appears to have been an important residence (Shinnie, 1955a). Shinnie further suggested that it

may have belonged to the ruler of Soba. This hypothesis stems also from the location of the mound at the apparent centre of the town.

As for ecclesiastical architecture, Shinnie's excavations were not informative. However, they did confirm the existence of a church cemetery. This seems to have been a characteristic feature associated with nearly all churches in mediaeval Nubia (Osman, 1973). The existing body of knowledge concerning the nature of the Soba church will, until further systematic excavations, depend largely on Clarke's conjectural plan (1912:36), drawn on the basis of the existing columns. His arrangement of the architectural features of the church (i.e., columns, apse, customary chambers) indicated that the church was probably a basilica. This is the earliest known type of church in mediaeval Nubia and is dated by Adams (1965) to A.D. 550 to 750 on the basis of the Lower Nubian examples.

5. *Archaeological Material*

Glass. The series of Soba glass studied by Harden (included in Shinnie's report, 1955a:60-75) assumes a considerable importance, not only because it reflects what seems to have been an established network of long-distance trade, but also because it is almost the only datable material recovered from the site.

In view of the lack of stratified sequences of deposits, a broad chronology spanning six centuries (sixth to twelfth centuries A.D.) is made possible by means of the imported glass. On the basis of glass types, this long period is divided into two separate, but interrelated, phases: the earliest occupation of the site (Mounds A and A1, or 7 and 8, on Map VI) which is dated to the sixth to ninth centuries A.D. and is dominated by Byzantine and Early Islamic glass vessels; and the later period (Mound B, or 3, and the church, on Map VI) characterized by Islamic glass and dated to the ninth to twelfth centuries A.D. According to Shinnie (1955a), the date of this occupation is also confirmed by the presence of four imported glazed sherds dated to the tenth century A.D.

In evaluating the dated periods by the glass, many of the same problems surrounding coins, such as hoarding and the manufacture of imitations arise, but without the benefit of an imprinted date which coins often carry. Shinnie, aware of this, considered the dating of the site to be provisional and speculative. In other words, the presence of glass does not necessarily imply that it is contemporary in an archaeological sense with other associated materials encountered at the excavated mounds. There is no fixed *terminus a quo* at one end or *terminus ad quem* at the other. Indeed, there is a considerable margin of error and an overlapping of the periods. This is clearly demonstrated in the case of mound A1 (or 8), the contents of which (building and pottery) were given the date

fifteenth to sixteenth centuries A.D., while the established date of the glass is sixth to ninth centuries A.D.

This uncertainty regarding the relative dating of the site could be due to a number of factors. It would appear that the glass of the mediaeval period had a wide range of distribution both in time and space. There seems to be no systematic glass typology; and because the glass is so varied, only gross classifications seem possible. Indeed, the Soba site has shown a wide variety of shapes and types. Among the known vessels are bowls, jars, jugs, and flasks, together with cups, lamps, bottles, window panes and boxes. Each of the major categories exhibits a wide internal range of variation in shape, form, decoration, and fabric.

However, despite this marked diversity, the collection of Soba glass exhibits broad patterns which show a general affinity with the known mediaeval glass. Such affinity, as recognized by Harden, is attested from a number of general and regional publications on Roman and Islamic materials covering the period between the fifth and fifteenth centuries A.D.

Apart from the published data, it is evident that the surface collections from Sennar and Aidhab, on the Red Sea coast, provide the closest parallels to Soba glass (Harden, in Shinnie, 1955a). The former is, however, represented by a single specimen, a flask, of a typical Soba type. The latter contains a relatively high proportion of glass categories covering the period between the eighth and fifteenth centuries A.D. Comparing these dates with the Soba chronology exemplifies the problem discussed earlier with regard to dating.

In this connection, it is significant to note that Aidhab, as attested by the travellers, was one of the important harbours of the tenth to fifteenth centuries A.D. It was not only a pilgrim terminus, but was also one of the main outlets connecting mediaeval Nubia with the outside world: the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and the Far East. The discovery of Chinese stoneware and porcelain at Aidhab testifies to its Far Eastern trade.

Pottery. Soba pottery appears to have shapes and fabrics innovative in pottery manufacture of the time. In his analysis, Shinnie classified the ceramics into nine classes, or wares, representing twenty-seven types. The main pottery classes, as described by Shinnie (1955a:28-50), are as follows:

Dongola Ware: This is a fine painted ware of white to pink paste, with white, cream, or buff slip. It consists mainly of small bowls and cups, decorated with stamped designs of animals or Christian emblems. This ware, which is the characteristic pottery of the mediaeval kingdom of Dongola, is not common at Soba, and it does not appear in the earliest occupation of the site (i.e., Mounds A and A1, or 7 and 8, on Map VI).

Soba Ware: The general characteristics of this ware are a fine pinkish fabric covered with black or cream slip to which painted designs, such as

bands, dots, rosettes, and graphic decorations in red, cream, or black, have been applied after firing. It comprises four distinct but related types, consisting primarily of small bowls. According to Shinnie, Soba ware represented a ceramic development distinct from earlier local wares in the tradition of Sudanese pottery. In addition, no material comparable to Soba ware is known from the surrounding countries, the only exceptions being one pot from Saqadi, complete bowls and potsherds from Burri, and sherds from Gadu, to be discussed below.

Red Burnished: This is a common ware at Soba. It consists of a large number of carinated bowls of black fracture covered with a red highly burnished slip with parallel grooves on the inside of the rim, and occasionally on the outside. The burnish is mainly on the interior of the vessels.

Black Burnished: This ware, which has many similarities to the red ware, is the most common of the finer wares at Soba. The ware is represented by a variety of bowls of different characteristics, i.e., plain, footed, and plate bowls. These are decorated with brown patches or parallel grooves around the rim and incisions (of chevron pattern). Graphic designs are common.

Coarse Red: This ware, which persisted throughout the occupational levels, is largely dominated by large storage jars of various shapes and forms. Other identifiable forms are restricted to the *gulla* ("water jar"), and the *gadus* ("saqia" or "water-wheel pot"). The decoration on the ware is largely confined to plastic treatment.

Pilgrim Vases: This is a fine red ware represented by a small number of vessels. The vessels are characterized by short narrow necks and two handles on high shoulders. Similar pots are known from Abu Sufyan in northern Kordofan and from the Christian site of Ghazali, also in northern Sudan. Pilgrim bottles had a wide distribution during the mediaeval period as is attested from studies of the Christian Nubian pottery of Lower Nubia by Adams (1962, 1967, 1968a), Lister (1967), Weeks (1967), and Trigger (1967).

Doka: This coarse black ware, which persisted throughout the entire sequence of excavated levels of the mounds, is composed of large dishes. It is similar to the modern *doka* which is used for baking *kisra* ("unleavened bread").

Glaze Ware: This imported class is represented by a few fragments of green glazed Arab ware. Only four pieces were identifiable, two of Fayum ware and two of a Mesopotamian ware, both dated by Shinnie to the tenth century A.D., although its appearance at Soba may be later. The greatest period of this glaze is said to have been the ninth to thirteenth centuries A.D., and it became popular during the reign of the Fatimids of Egypt from A.D. 969 to 1117. (Butler, 1926:150)

Fine Red: This is a very rare ware of reddish appearance restricted to the church site; no forms can be identified.

These pottery classes indicate the range of variation encountered at Soba. The main ceramic materials, other than vessels, were sherds with graffiti, figurines, and spindle whorls. The first represent the only inscriptional evidence brought to light by the excavation. These inscriptions, which were written in Coptic letters, appear to have been either invocations to God, or stamps of ownership. The figurines, terra cotta sculptures of animals or humans, may have been associated with fertility or other religious beliefs as known from an earlier time. The spindle whorls, used to weight the spindle and maintain the rotation necessary for drawing out and twisting fibres when making thread, are larger and heavier than the wooden whorls used in modern times.

Other Finds. A wide variety of beads and a few small objects in metal and stone were found, as well as some miscellaneous items in wood, ivory, and gold. A description of these objects follows.

Beads: The beads from Soba were numerous and displayed a variety of shapes, colours, and materials. The materials from which they were made fall into five main groups: clay, ostrich eggshell, faience, glass, and stone. The former three were the most common. Clay beads are assumed to have been used as an abacus (Shinnie, 1955a:52). Glass beads, which represent the largest Soba series, were primarily a type known as "Venetian pound." A second prevalent type is called "eye." Other beads were made from semi-precious stones such as agate, carnelian, crystal, and amethyst. Basalt, white grit, mudstone, and lapis lazuli were also bead materials.

According to Shinnie, the semi-precious stone beads of Soba bear analogies with those of Cambay, in India, described by Arkell. The subject of agate, onyx, and carnelian in the Sudan was described by Arkell:

> I am convinced that all the agate and carnelian beads as still to be found in use in the Sudan have come from Cambay and that they have reached Egypt or the Eastern African coast both by sea and overland via Persia. . . . There has been a continual stream of agate and carnelian beads . . . from the Cambay vicinity to Egypt and the east Coast of Africa during the last 1900 years. This stream may have been, and probably was, at its greatest volume between A.D. 1300 and 1800 and I consider it probable that most of the beads . . . now to be found in Sudan have reached that country since 1300. . . . (Arkell, 1936:304)

Whatever the relation between Cambay and Soba may have been, it is apparent that there is a clear resemblance between Soba beads and those found in the Meroitic village site of Abu Geili, to be discussed below. In fact, beads of all materials, with the possible exception of agate, had a wide distribution throughout the Meroitic period. They constitute one of the most common artifact classes associated with nearly all known Meroitic cemeteries and townsites. Besides Meroe itself and the royal cemeteries (Robertson, 1976), beads are known from Sanam (Griffith, 1923), Faras (Griffith, 1924), Karanog (Woolley and MacIver, 1910), and Jebel Moya (Addison, 1949), to name a few. However, no efforts have been made to standardize terminologies to facilitate comparative studies or even to delimit horizon markers.

Metal Objects: These are of iron and copper. The former are represented by thirteen objects including knife blades, spear heads, spiral rings, and a single-barbed arrowhead. The copper consists of four rings.

Stone Objects: These were, by far, the most numerous objects in the site. They fall into three main categories: saddle querns, rubbers, and pounders. The querns are identical to the modern *murhaka* ("grindstone"). In addition to these objects, which were, and still are, widely used for grinding millet, sorghum, and other material, there is also a small number of archers' looses. These are rings hooked around the thumb to increase the bowman's draw. The first correct explanation of their use was obtained by Arkell (1947) who found stone rings still in position on the right thumbs of skeletons in two Meroitic graves which also contained iron arrowheads. During mediaeval times, the Nubians were described by the Arab writers as being the greatest archers.

Scarabs: Two of these were found while digging an irrigation channel some distance from the excavations. They were, however, of Napatan or Meroitic style (the term "Napata" is often used to designate the earlier period of the Meroitic civilization, ca. 750–300 B.C.; for further discussion of this term see Griffith, 1911; 1916; 1917; Reisner, 1910; 1923; Dunham, 1946; Hakem, 1972; and Adams, 1977). Scarabs were a constant element in the Meroitic culture. Like the beads, they were found in almost all Meroitic occupations. Commenting on those uncovered from Jebel Moya, Addison stated that the design of crocodiles is common on scarabs and plaques of the Napatan period (Addison, 1949:118).

6. *Summary of the Archaeological Record of Soba*

The material described above is a summary of the major archaeological work carried out in the domain of the kingdom of Alwa. As seen from the results of these excavations, the data are too incomplete to unravel the complexities of even a single site, let alone to provide generalizations

about human interaction at the regional level. The fragmentary nature of the archaeological record was well recognized by Shinnie, who stated:

> The excavations of Soba have added nothing to our knowledge of the history of the town or of the historical events that took place during its 1000 years of existence. . . . The archaeological evidence has done little to amplify the writings of mediaeval Arab writers. It confirms the existence of a large town with a moderate standard of cultural development, and suggests, what also appears from these writers, that Soba was at the height of its prosperity from the ninth to the twelfth centuries. (Shinnie, 1955a:76)

The above citation raises doubts about the period prior to and after the ninth to twelfth centuries A.D., a period which corresponds to the classic Christian period (ca. A.D. 850-1050) of Adams' general chronological development of mediaeval Nubia as seen from Lower Nubia. If the theory of the peak of the town being between the ninth and twelfth centuries A.D. is accepted, how can the apparent conflict of the proposed chronology of the site be reconciled? As mentioned, glass is the only datable archaeological material; the glass in question lasted a long time, hence it seems inconclusive to consider it contemporary in an archaeological sense. The overlap which occurred in the earliest occupation period of the site clearly shows that the glass is not a secure foundation upon which to base reliable conclusions.

Although Soba is a key site, the excavations there have failed to establish any archaeological sequences. These excavations were guided by a historical perspective, placing the emphasis on material culture and the establishment of a chronology, rather than on any broader considerations. In his own words, Shinnie has said:

> Mound A was selected for the excavation . . . as being the highest mound . . . on the site and therefore the most likely to represent a long period of occupation and give a full pottery series. (Shinnie, 1955a:18)

However, the excavation was inconclusive and shed no light on Soba's occupation during the time of the Meroitic empire. The Meroitic traces found at Soba, such as the ram and the scarabs, were not in context; no stratified remains of this kind have ever been recorded. This does not rule out the possibility that there will be future finds of this nature which might corroborate a Meroitic, or even a Napatan, occupation. However, this does not prove conclusively that there was a lack of Meroitic influence, or a Meroitic phase.

Burials, together with finds of Meroitic date, have been recorded by Arkell (1949:119) from the Khartoum hospital site. Meroitic graves have been excavated which contained objects of Shaheinab type (Arkell, 1953). This evidence suggests that the area of the Khartoum province (including

Soba) was within the Meroitic sphere of influence. The lack of substantial evidence for this, from Soba, may well be due to insufficient survey and excavation.

Meroitic occupation, or influence, has been discovered as far south as the Sennar region, i.e., Jebel Moya and Abu Geili, and in the eastern Butana at Jebel Qeili. This evidence, together with the existence of *hafirs* (characteristic of Meroitic culture), suggests that Soba was founded originally by the kingdom of Meroe. The favourable location of Soba on the trade routes, to be discussed in a subsequent section, enabled it to be a town of considerable importance and possibly even the second greatest centre of trade flourishing during the time of the Meroitic kingdom.

The only firm evidence which points to the period known as Late Meroitic is found in the considerable number of beads and other small objects mentioned above. These finds, at Abu Geili and Saqadi, in the Sennar region, are considered to originate in late Meroitic times and to have persisted into Christian times (Addison, 1951), suggesting a cultural continuity between the late Meroitic and early Christian eras. In this connection, it seems reasonable to assume that Meroitic types continued for an indefinite period. There were gradual changes of fashion and style, resulting eventually in the new types, but no sudden break. That is, the small objects, some of which are persistent elements of the local material culture, indicate that there is no *terminus ad quem* for the Meroitic culture; it is a conventional assumption that it ended in A.D. 300 or A.D. 350, after which no Meroitic pottery or other typical Meroitic objects were made.

Yet, cultural continuity in Nubia is well attested from the extensive excavations in the extreme north of the Sudan, where more than 250 sites have been excavated in Lower Nubia. It is apparent that the transition from Meroitic to X-group, the oddly named successor culture of the late fourth to early sixth centuries A.D., or from the X-group to the Christian period, was a gradual one, as noted by Junker:

> There is no striking difference between the X-group and Meroitic cultures. The grave forms are almost the same in both, the difference being mainly in the preference for individual types; numerous pottery types were found in both as well as iron spears, arrowheads and tools. Thus both represent in Nubia a single culture which either directly or indirectly developed into that of the Christian period. (Junker, cited in Trigger, 1967:80)

Adams, who offered a sound stratigraphic record of this continuity in Lower Nubia, called attention to the lack of evidence for any sudden change between Meroitic and X-group times (Adams, 1964:163; 1968b: 179). The similarities between the X-group and the Christian period have been more generally recognized than that between the X-group and the Meroitic, but here there has been a tendency to emphasize the differences

between the latter, although these differences are generally in the sphere of religion.

In the central Sudan, the centuries immediately following the decline of Meroe and the Axumite conquest (which corresponds to the X-group culture in the north) are an archaeological blank and will remain so until filled by a stratigraphic excavation. This dearth of information poses a great problem when considering the nature and origin of the kingdom of Alwa. Yet, it is not difficult to discern the cultural similarities between the late Meroitic and Alwan cultures. In addition to the evidence mentioned above, this continuity is provided by some aspects of the material culture, ecology, and the distributional evidence of the sites.

Returning to Shinnie's excavations, some questions were raised concerning the nature and the plan of the site. Apart from the partially unearthed domestic architecture and the church, the excavations have provided no evidence as to any major constructions that would be expected in such a large urban centre. Such lacunae give rise to certain fundamental questions, such as: Can we distinguish any sort of zoning in the architectural plan of the site structures on these mounds? Do these mounds reveal any clue as to the plan of the city? In what direction was the city of Soba laid out? Do these mounds represent any developmental trend in the architectural history of Soba? Are these mounds identical in terms of architecture, or do they represent a complex of substantial public or specialized buildings, such as granaries, markets, latrines, taverns, governmental constructions, etc.? How was this complex defended? Do the open areas between the mounds indicate the spatial aspect of the town, i.e., streets, plazas, or alleys?

The excavations have provided no sense of the morphology of the town, its general layout, and the plan of its different parts. These, when known, will provide an insight into the social structure of its inhabitants. It may reveal distinctive characteristics which may prove to be an expression of the social, political, religious, and/or economic patterns. This will also shed some light on the factors determining the community pattern of Soba. Evaluation of the ecological, sociocultural, and historical circumstances of Soba suggests a preindustrial city with a centralized economic organization, a class system, a formal government, and education and a degree of literacy (conforming to the model of Sjoberg, 1955:444). Although the final answers to the questions posed above lie in a more complete survey and excavation of the city, it is still worthwhile to discuss the data presently available.

In addition to being the royal seat of the kingdom of Alwa for over a thousand years, Soba is the only known large urban centre of its period in the heartland of mediaeval Nubia. These two factors would have influenced the structure of the city of Soba. In the northern Sudan, the outstanding feature of the Nubian natural environment is the Nile Valley,

which has had a profound effect on the patterns of settlement. In the central Sudan, the Nile is comprised of several separate rivers, each of significance. Other significant ecological aspects include the summer rainfalls, the large wadis, the *hafirs* ("artificial depressions"), extensive grazing, and the crossing of the area by trade routes, all of which contributed to the rise of Soba. The location of Soba combines two ecological niches, for although it is situated on the Blue Nile, it also lies at the mouth of Wadi Bent Bady and Wadi Soba and forms an important outlet for all the inland areas of the western and eastern Butana. Hence, it may have served as a point of contact between the Nile riverine farmers and the Butana pastoralists. In addition to these features, Soba was a centre of salt mining (see Map II), a crucially important industry in the Sudan until the late nineteenth century (Zarroug, 1978).

The location of Soba in the central Sudan, a major source of important export items such as gold, ivory, gum, frankincense, and rhinoceros horns, made it a logical central place for caravan routes running from the Red Sea and Ethiopia in the east; the upper Nile to the south; the land and Nile routes to the north; and west to as far as the Chad depression. This significant point is discussed further in Chapter 3. However, the spatial importance must have encouraged craft specialization and the segregation of the city of Soba into specialized parts. These factors may have led to an increase in population, class stratification, and intra-ethnic variation. Nonetheless, confirmation of such hypotheses would require a thorough knowledge of the material culture which, it is presumed, lies buried in the mounds at Soba.

The final point to be considered in connection with the results of the excavations at Soba is related to the ceramics. As is evident from the description of Soba pottery, Shinnie's typology is little more than a field note system of classification and cannot stand as a formal, regional analytical framework. In his classification, there is nothing to denote chronological sequence of typological development. One of the major problems confronting a systematic approach to the understanding of the ceramic record of Soba is the lack of a standardized set of terms with which to describe and classify the material. Terms such as ware, type, or class are used indiscriminately in any description of Soba pottery. Although "ware" was never formally defined, the term was used by Shinnie to indicate a combination of properties. Primarily, these properties, as used to describe the Soba ceramics, have been manufacturing techniques, such as handmade or wheel-made, colour, surface treatment, including slipped or burnished, and place names. From the description of Soba pottery, it seems that Shinnie's analysis was based on both a wares and forms classification. The classification was accomplished by a brief description of the wares, and a series of illustrations of the forms often called "types." A single ware often combined several types (Shinnie, 1955a:50).

Shinnie's work on Soba pottery was largely descriptive and informative in intent rather than formally analytical or typological. No attempt was made at any formal classification of the pottery in order to trace the development of Soba ceramics. No attempt was made to quantify the ceramics, nor to note the range of variation within the groupings. No sequence of attribute changes, and variations, through time and space was established for Soba ware which Shinnie, because of its special technique of painting after firing, considered to be a new development in the ceramic history of the Sudan. However, since the purpose of the ceramic reports was solely to illustrate, in a general way, the kind of pottery found, the reports cannot be expected to produce more information than that. To obtain more detail would require a re-examination of the original collections. Furthermore, while it is assumed that the excavations of Soba have brought to light a reasonable sample of the material remains, a comprehensive picture of the society and the culture, its subsistence systems, economic networks, and relations to the neighbouring areas, remain entirely unknown. These issues will be the subject of Chapter 3. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to a description of the known archaeological sites of the kingdom of Alwa apart from Soba.

C. Other Known Archaeological Sites of the Kingdom of Alwa

There are many different archaeological sites in the area formerly known as the domain of the kingdom of Alwa. The list of sites given below is by no means complete because our knowledge of these sites is primarily based on surface description rather than on excavation. The list is intended to provide a general idea of the distributional patterns of the sites in question. Even in the cases of excavated sites, no accurate chronology has yet been established. For the purpose of description, the sites under examination will be categorized under four main regions: The Middle Nile, the Butana, the Gezira, and the Qoz.

1. The Middle Nile Region

This term denotes the Nile Valley between Abu Hamed and Atbara, a distance of about 224 km (see Map VII). The region includes fourteen sites.

Al-Kurru. This site consists of a rectangular castle, a mosque-church, and a graveyard. The castle, which was built of stone and red brick, consists of an inner and outer enclosure, and presumably towers with flanking walls. Traces of mud buildings (rectangular houses) and stone found-

ations, together with columns, were found in both the inner and outer enclosures (Crawford, 1961:32). A few fragments of tiles were also found.

The mosque appeared to have been built around a pre-existing church. This, according to Crawford, is attested from the plan of the mosque which resembles that of the Christian churches at al-Usheir and Gandeisi. The main difference between this mosque and the other one, in the same village, is that the windows of the former are rectangular holes with a flat stone lintel, whereas those of the latter are triangular, formed by two bricks. There is also a small window-like opening at the bottom of the apse. The apse had been transformed into a *mihrab*, the niche which shows the direction of Mecca, by additional mud walling. Outside of the mosque is a large boulder, whose centre had been hollowed out, and whose edge had been made smooth by rubbing. This, according to Crawford (1961:34), was certainly the front of the church.

The associated graveyard is a *gubba* ("domed tomb") cemetery with broken brick and mortar. Among the finds were potsherds which Crawford (1961) referred to as Christian potsherds. Also, numerous broken tiles with raised crosses were found. The inscriptions were written with Greek or Coptic letters. Most of the epitaphs contained prayers and dedications to God. One of the Coptic inscriptions is given the date A.D. 917 (Crawford, 1961:35).

Kurgus. At this site, two walls of sun-dried brick represent a building standing in the debris of a small undefended village. The building may once have been a church, but not enough of its walls remain to restore its plan (Crawford, 1953:17).

Atmur. This site consists of the remains of a village built of both red and sun-dried bricks, some of which bear Christian crosses. Numerous potsherds, which Crawford asserted were Christian, lie scattered on the surface of the site. Associated with this village are some graves, remains of Christian *gubbas*, and a pile of brick rubble which, locally, is called *al-kanisa* ("the church") suggesting a Christian origin (Crawford, 1953:17). The whole site stands within a large semi-circular earthen bank whose diameter is, according to Crawford, 960 paces.

Gereif. This site is described by Crawford, who stated that "It had evidently once been a considerable village whose shapeless stone ruins covered a wide area . . . there are quantities of potsherds whose Christian character is confirmed by a fragment of a tile with an embossed cross on it" (Crawford, 1953:15). There are also several stone enclosures and groups of graves. Among the other finds are a few bits of red-painted plaster. The discovery of a Meroitic burial, the location of which was not specified by Crawford, suggests a long period of occupation (Crawford, 1953:16). In Crawford's view, the site has been so disturbed by extensive digging, that no plan can now be discerned.

Artul Island. This site is a mosque, with a tower, which embodies the structure of an earlier, Christian church. It contains four cylindrical columns, now about a foot high, which supported the roof. A frieze of stone around the outside of the walls, and below the roof, contained some carvings of crosses, including a Maltese cross inside a circle and a rosette design. The church walls appear to have been of stone, for a few courses of dry stone walling are still visible at the bottom (Crawford, 1961:15). According to Jackson (1926:27), the mosque contains ninety-nine small windows just below the roof, arranged so that the sun never penetrates into the building.

Kuddik. The remains of this site, which lies on the west bank, suggest it was an ancient monastery with stout walls of broken, red brick and stone (Jackson, 1926:28). The finds include a number of sherds of Christian pottery and one inscribed brick or tile. Although Crawford (1961) referred to the site as Christian, he claimed that the building would appear to represent a ruined bastion. Neither Jackson nor Crawford supplied evidence or reasoning to support their claims.

Al-Zuma. This site is composed of a rectangular mud enclosure on stone foundation measuring 54.9 × 64 m. Owing to the presence of a hut-circle, Crawford asserted that the structure would appear to be of Christian character (Crawford, 1961).

Wadi Dam al-Tor. This site is situated on the west bank some 3 km northwest of Baqeir. The area consists of a habitation site and a graveyard. The remains include houses of both red and sun-dried brick. There is a large quantity of potsherds, all with indications of Christian association, including several with incised crosses (Crawford, 1961). Another feature of the site is scattered piles of red brick.

The graveyard is composed of many graves with Christian *gubbas.* The surface of some of these graves consists of circles and mounds of brick interspersed with cement and stone, similar to those found at al-Usheir. The graveyard is covered with many fragments of red-painted plaster and several pieces of tile with Greek lettering. The graveyard is considered by Crawford to contain the tombs of distinguished people or perhaps of ecclesiastics or holy men who, alone, were deemed worthy of inscribed memorial tablets (Crawford, 1961:26). There is nothing in the evidence to establish the date more precisely than the presence of Greek writing.

Tarfaya. The core of this site consists of the remains of what may once have been a square or rectangular enclosure, with semi-circular or round towers (Crawford, 1961). Inside the enclosure are the remains of three round huts, about 6 m in diameter, built of red brick. There are also the remains of sun-dried brick buildings and a cemetery, as indicated from the red brick debris (Crawford, 1961:16-17). The material remains

consist of fragments of red-painted wall plaster, querns, and a considerable number of potsherds of the Christian period.

Baqeir. A stone foundation of what appears to have been a fort, with a bastion, is the main visible feature of this site. Besides the fort, there were two graves and four kiln-mounds with quantities of potsherds and some wood-ash. They seemed, to Crawford, to belong to the Christian period, although he gave no evidence to support this impression (Crawford, 1961:30).

Gandeisi Island. This site consists of the remains of a church and a castle, with associated graveyard. The church, which is nearly square (7.6 × 7 m), has a rectangular apse with an opening at its base. The church was built of red brick.

The castle is a small four-sided enclosure with seven bastions. Inside the castle are the remains of mud and stone buildings. Both the church and the castle were covered with the scattered fragments of the usual Christian pottery. The graveyard is composed of several mounds of both stone and brick with some mortar debris.

Al-Usheir Island. This site consists of a church, a castle, and associated cemetery. The church is of red brick, trapezoid in shape, with a semi-circular apse, the sides of the church being almost equal, about 12.2 m in length. The roof was supported by nine cylindrical brick piers 0.9 m in diameter. Some of the church walls were strengthened by brick buttresses placed against their inner side. Associated with the church are the remains of stone buildings and some small hut-circles. Other finds consisted of fragments of brick inscribed in Coptic letters.

The castle consists of outer and inner enclosures, with eleven bastions and a tower. There are walls supporting a platform in front of the outer enclosure. In the inner enclosure is a structure which Crawford (1961:20) called a quay of red brick set in a hard mortar. There were, according to Crawford, abundant remains of habitations in the castle, but it was difficult to discern the plans. The surface of the castle is dotted with scattered potsherds (some with crosses), querns, and a stone inscribed with a cross and two geometric figures.

Al-Gol. This site lies to the north of al-Bauga on the west bank of the Nile. It consists of thirty-three graves identified by Crawford (1953) as Christian, perhaps because of their exact east-west orientation. They were not, according to Crawford (1953), really graves at all, but rather coffin-shaped tombs, the massive stone sides of which are built up to a height of some 4.3 m, and which are 1.8 m long. They were placed in rows, fairly close together and filled with rubble grit. Some of them appeared to be burial cairns set in the middle of a large round enclosure of small stones. Similar graves were found at Ghazali.

Al-Bauga. This site is a large area covered with red brick rubble and potsherds, mostly with a red slip decorated in the dotted festoon orna-

ment of the Christian period (Crawford, 1953:12). The relationship of Al-Bauga pottery to Soba ware cannot be determined with any degree of certainty. Although the site has been encroached upon by cultivation and houses, there were still extensive remains of brick walls.

2. The Butana Region

The Butana region comprises both the Nile Valley between Atbara and Khartoum and the district of the ancient Island of Meroe which lies between the Atbara River, the Nile, and the Blue Nile (see Map V). There are eight known sites in this region:

Zeidab. In this site, which is situated on a hill to the east of Zeidab, both Meroitic and Christian sherds were found (Hintze, 1959:172).

Um Ali. Massive sandstone cliffs are the setting for extensive quarries from which stones for building Meroe probably came (Arkell, 1949). According to Arkell, the quarries were subsequently used as cave dwellings by the Christians, probably a community of monks, who used the larger cave as a church. The contents of this site include a number of inscriptions in Greek letters and in the Old Nubian language, together with monograms and crosses (Arkell, 1949:3-4). The walls of the quarries are closely covered with rock drawings: human beings, lions, giraffes, camels, cattle, fish, and geometric signs (Hintze, 1959:174).

Gadu. This site, which lies to the north of Meroe, is composed of a number of mounds covered with red brick, similar to that of Soba (Hintze, 1959:175). The main mound is 2.5 m high. Only one sherd of Soba ware was found, according to Shinnie (1955a).

Qerri. This site is located on Jebel Irau, which is one of the series of the granite hills of the Sabaloka Gorge (Sixth Cataract), near the modern village of Qerri. On the top of this Jebel, which extends over 12 ha, there are remains of houses, corrals, enclosures, and terraces. The buildings were constructed adjacent to each other, so as to form an oval complex, which is enclosed by massive defensive walls of dry stone masonry (Chittick, 1963:269). Apart from rock engravings and red brick of Christian type, the only datable objects were fragments of potsherds of Islamic monochrome glazed ware dated between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D.

According to Chittick, this fortified settlement bears remarkable resemblance to those of Darfur, all of which are situated on hills, often with a defensive wall of irregular plan, making use of natural features. Similar constructions have been found at the Christian sites of Ain Farah, Abu Sufyan, and Zankor, where red brick was also employed.

In view of the similarity of Jebel Irau to these sites, Chittick was inclined to identify this fortified hilltop as the last Christian stronghold

in the Sudan (Chittick, 1963:272). This claim is supported by oral tradition, preserved by the Abdallab Arabs (as the destroyers of Soba came to be known after the days of their eponymous leader), who asserted that the survivors of the Arab attack escaped from Soba and made a last stand in a fortress at Qerri.

Sarurab. This site consists of sprawling villages along the west bank of the Nile, 30 km north of Omdurman. Throughout the millennia, the Nile had eroded a wide bay in the mudstone layer and built up an extensive, broad flood plain. At the edge of this plain, raised ridges of gravel and coarse red sand occur, their shape affected by numerous *khors* and other water courses (Hakem, 1979:151).

The area is covered by several thousand mounds which form the most conspicuous archaeological features in the area. The grave goods of some of the excavated mounds, which include iron arrowheads, spears, knives, and rings, as well as beads of different materials (glass, stone, faience, and shell), appear to be similar to the small finds from Soba. The mounds have been interpreted by some scholars as being affiliated to the Tanqasi culture.

However, other evidence has shown that some of these mounds, which were constructed over the burial pits of the Meroitic and/or the late Meroitic graves, were re-used by the Christians during mediaeval times. Although there is evidence of a Christian cemetery, there is no other evidence of definitively Christian affiliation. The preliminary excavations of the habitation site of Jebel Um Marrahi at the northern limit of the Sarurab area, revealed that the site, which was occupied during the Neolithic and the Meroitic periods, merges directly into the mediaeval (including Christian) and Islamic periods (Hakem, 1979). In this connection, it should be pointed out that the excavations of the Sarurab area were mainly concerned with the Neolithic and the Meroitic periods, and no efforts were made to identify the nature of the Christian occupation.

Musawwarat al-Sufra. This is the most important Meroitic site in the Butana region. Besides the Meroitic artifacts, the site has yielded a number of Greek and Nubian inscriptions. Some of these inscriptions are similar to those found at Soba (Erman, 1881:15). One of the inscriptions, as recognized by Erman, bears the name "Stephanos." It is tempting to identify this name with "Istabnus," the king of Alwa, mentioned by Ibn Hawqal.

Qoz Regeb. This is a multi-cultural site located at Jebel Erembat, in the Qoz Regeb village. It consists of both Neolithic and Christian occupations. The former is attested by the presence of numerous potsherds, flakes, querns, hammerstones, and a stone axe (Crawford, 1953:4). The latter, which is of most concern here, consists of stone buildings with remains of wooden beams and many red bricks (on some of which crosses

were marked before firing). Associated with these remains is a large graveyard with about 100 graves of oval shape, each about 4 m long. They are covered with quartz pebbles and many broken saddle-querns of granite. Although Crawford suggested that these graves are Christian, the basis of this attribution was not made clear. Crawford argued that the stone building may have been a Christian *gubba*, the upper part of which was red brick. In addition to these features, there are remains of rectangular buildings and a round cairn, but there is nothing to indicate whether the buildings and cairn were contemporary with the Neolithic remains or the Christian graves (Crawford, 1961).

Jebel Maman. This site, which is about 140 km east of Qoz Regeb (not show on the map) consists of stone ruins and tombs of the Christian period (Budge, 1907:305).

It is apparent that there were few Christian occupations in the Butana as compared to the Meroitic sites, more than fifty of which are known (Hintze, 1959 and Crowfoot 1920). This may, in part, be attributed to the fact that most of the investigations have been concerned with the study of the Meroitic culture, as the region is considered to be the traditional Meroitic heartland. It seems reasonable to assume that most of the Meroitic sites of this region were also occupied during the mediaeval period, as suggested by the inscription of Ezana. It is also important to note that some of the sites in this region bear Nubian place names, including Sabaloka, Islang Island, Wawisi, and (Jebel) Qeili.

3. *The Gezira Region*

The area between the Blue Nile and the White Nile, extending from Fazughli on the Blue Nile in the south to as far north as Khartoum, is called the "Gezira" (see Map IV). This region includes a number of sites which will be described here, starting in the south where the sites have been most extensively researched.

Abu Geili. This site is situated on the east bank of the Blue Nile, 227 km south of Soba. It is composed of a large mound containing some 100 small rooms of sun-dried brick, and an extensive cemetery. The three formations which were found on the site were, starting at the bottom, the conglomerate gravel, the silt of the former Nile Island, and the archaeological, or human, strata.

The site was divided by Addison (1951) into two separate periods: the first, which covers the mound or the village site, is dated to the third century B.C. to the seventh century A.D. This date was obtained from Meroitic gravegoods associated with the occupation of the village. The other period, the Fung period, restricted to the cemetery, dated to the

beginning of the second-half of the sixteenth century A.D. The date of the cemetery was established by a glass vessel of a post-Roman period, dated by Harden, to the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries A.D. (Harden, in Addison, 1951:9). However, it should be noted that the dating of the village site and the cemetery was considered, by Addison, to be largely a matter of conjecture. He also asserted that "the duration of the occupation of the village site cannot be estimated exactly" (Addison, 1951:10).

The pottery of Abu Geili is grouped into four classes. The first three classes are associated with the occupation of the village, and the fourth one belongs to the graveyard. The village pottery is further divided into handmade and wheel-made ware. The most common types of the handmade pottery are: the round-bottomed black polished ware with impressed decoration filled with pigment; light brown burnished ware with both red and white pigment; and red polished ware with dry-scratched decoration.

All of the wheel-made pottery is of red ware, mostly cups, bowls, and flasks, covered with red slip similar to the Meroitic pottery. Other wheel-made pottery includes fragments of painted or stamped Meroitic pottery (dated between the second and fourth centuries A.D.) and the green-glazed ware. The latter is of two types: Chinese celadon and mediaeval Arab ware, dated to the twelfth century A.D.

The pottery of the graves appears to be entirely different from the village ceramics. It consists of handmade, rather flat, open bowls of a black-polished ware with grey or brown patches decorated on the outside in an incised pattern. The common feature is a row of punch-marks between the incised geometric designs. The pottery (whether all or part is not clear) is also characterized by two sets of four or six holes pierced through the sides (Addison, 1951:53).

In addition to the pottery, Abu Geili produced numerous beads of different materials and a considerable number of miscellaneous finds. The latter, which appear to be similar to those found at Soba, are considered by Addison to be of late Meroitic origin with persistence into the Christian period. The beads were extremely varied, covering differing periods of times. Like those of Soba, the materials chiefly used were clay, ostrich eggshell, faience, carnelian, agate, glass, and quartz. The glass beads are grouped into three types: late Roman or Byzantine, dated to the third to seventh centuries A.D.; early Arab, dated to the ninth to thirteenth centuries A.D.; and contemporary modern types, dated to the seventeenth century A.D. (Addison, 1951:72).

As noted above, the artifacts from the site can be divided into two periods. The later period is separated from that of the village by nearly a millennium. To clarify this picture, Addison argued that "there are no indications of occupation between Period I and Period II, and the evidence of these fragments of imported wares is not sufficient to establish

it" (Addison, 1951:53). He added that the orientation and the burial attitudes in this cemetery do not reflect the Christian tradition, but rather suggest that the religious beliefs imply a state of transition from paganism to Islam. In this connection, it will be noted that the identity of the people who are buried in this cemetery remains obscure. However, the presence of glass beads, together with imported glazed ware, seems to bridge the gap between the two periods.

Saqadi. This site lies at the foot of Jebel Saqadi about 19 km northwest of Jebel Moya. The excavations of 1913 brought to light a stone wall enclosing an area of about 25 × 20 m as well as a more modern red brick building. Associated with these were fragments of pottery and other small objects.

Three main strata were distinguished: *A* (uppermost), *B*, and *C*. The *B*, or middle, ashy-grey stratum was sharply differentiated from the darker layers above and below it. It was bounded both at the top and bottom by a 'floor' within the walled enclosure (Addison, 1951:120). The building remains associated with these strata were (*i*) an enclosing wall whose base extended just below the floor separating the *B* and *C* strata, (*ii*) debris of mud brick, found in stratum *B*, and (*iii*) remains of a red brick structure on top of the mud brick debris and mainly in stratum *A*.

The enclosing wall, whose general shape is rectangular, was built of granite embedded in mud mortar. It did not, according to Addison, seem to have been a fortification or a protective wall, but was rather a boundary wall which enclosed a building and only part of the habitation area.

The mud brick debris which was found in stratum *B* at Saqadi indicates the existence of a sun-dried brick building which was erected within the enclosure after the stone wall was built. Mackenzie and Addison (1951) agreed that the wall and the mud brick structure were of the same date. The history and the nature of this building are obscure, for no remains of walls were found.

The red brick construction of stratum *A* consists of remains of lower courses and of a brick stairway built against the external face of the stone wall. It is presumed that the red brick building replaced the earlier and less permanent mud brick building. Some of the bricks were marked with crosses suggesting that the structure may have been the remains of a Christian church. According to Addison, the plan of the building—or as much of it as exists—closely resembles the plan of some of the small Christian churches in the extreme north of the Sudan, such as those of Serra East or Addendan. This view is also supported by the presence of iron crosses, and a few fragments of bowls of painted fine red ware with a red slip. Similar pottery was found at Burri and is considered, by Shinnie (1955a), to be similar to Soba ware.

In material culture, such as pottery, beads, and other small finds, the assemblage found at Saqadi is practically identical to the Abu Geili

assemblage. Conspicuously absent from Saqadi were any fragments of flat polished decorated bowls and braziers characteristic of the second period at Abu Geili. However, on the basis of the similarities in pottery, beads, and small objects, the site was considered, by Addison, as contemporary with the village site of Abu Geili and was thought to indicate the slow emerging of the Meroitic into Christian culture (Addison, 1951:142). Whether or not Saqadi was originally occupied during the Meroitic period was not made clear.

Wad al-Haddad. The site was a Christian grave which was found during the digging of the foundation of a modern house. The grave was furnished with pots of globular bodies and long narrow necks with flaring rims and shallow black burnished bowls, and small dishes bearing Christian emblems (Balfour-Paul, 1952).

Um Sunt. This is a habitation site excavated by Balfour-Paul (1952). It consists of a number of huts, together with a graveyard. The huts are small, low mounds marked by slabs of baked mud and lumps of daub with marks of wattle. The excavation of one of these huts, which measured 4.5 m in diameter, has revealed a single occupation floor. The material remains include large storage bowls, fragments of small bowls, and two reconstructible black burnished (inside and out) bowls of wheel-made ware (Balfour-Paul, 1952:208). Two complete vessels of black burnished ware, together with some faience beads were recovered from the excavated graves. The general characteristics of this pottery are as follows: dimpled base, shallow, recessed bands below the rim; some having perforated bases. The decoration is restricted to plastic treatment with geometric patterns. Two pottery types are known: shallow unslipped with vestigial base, and a gourd-like shape with an incised symbol. Balfour-Paul claimed that the site, the date of which is unknown, represents one of the early cultures of the northern reaches of the Blue Nile valley. In view of the presence of the black burnished bowls, Shinnie considered the site as a variant of the very similar pottery types found at Soba (Shinnie, 1955a:77).

Al-Eleila. This is a large settlement site, situated on the east bank of the Blue Nile, where fragments of black burnished pottery of the Soba variety were found (Balfour, 1952:211).

Arbagi. This site is situated on the west bank of the Blue Nile about 148 km south of Khartoum. It is an extensive site covering an area of about 1 km in length (north to south), and 0.75 km east to west. The surface of the site is strewn with potsherds, grinding stones, bones, and shells. Other surface indications consist of the foundations of mud brick structures. Outside the arbitrary limits of the site there is an area which contains an ancient cemetery. Associated with this cemetery are the remains of five *gubbas* built of red brick belonging to the Fung era (Mohamed, 1979:6). The evidence for this attribution was not presented.

The bricks were found to be of large size as compared to the modern red bricks from the area. The size of the brick varies in length between 35 and 40 cm, the width varies between 15 and 20 cm, and the thickness varies between 7 and 10 cm.

There are, among the surface collection, five painted potsherds of fine ware with relief decoration similar to that of Soba ware.

Hasaheisa. In this site, which is located on the west bank of the Blue Nile, only fragments of painted decoration in red with white slip, similar to Soba pottery, were found (Balfour-Paul, 1952:213).

Burri. This site, which is an extension of Khartoum city, lies on the west bank of the Blue Nile (see Map II). The site is known by the inhabitants of the town to contain numbers of buried walls of red brick, which they dig up in order to re-use the bricks. Addison, who inspected the site, stated that "it appears to be a small town which had a settled existence of some duration" (Addison, 1930:285). He added that the brickwork remaining *in situ* consisted of part of the walls of a small chamber. These walls were built in alternate courses in headers and stretchers which appear to have been laid in mud mortar. The bricks were of unusual size and measured on the average 40 × 20 × 7 cm (Addison, 1930).

The incidental digging of these bricks resulted in the discovery of a number of complete vessels, including a lamp, as well as potsherds of both handmade and wheel-made manufacture. According to Addison, some of the Burri pottery has post-Meroitic and others have Christian affinities. The former is represented by black polished dishes. The latter is clearly reflected in the lamp and the painted pottery, which was considered by Shinnie (1955a) to be typical Soba ware. Addison, who was inclined to date the site to the seventh century A.D., stated that the wheel-made pottery of Burri was similar to that found by Jackson (1926) at Gandeisi and Kuddik, and by Arkell in the Abu Hamed district (Addison, 1930:287).

Other sites on the Blue Nile, such as Kutrang, Alti, Bashagra, Kasamer, Kamlin, and Branco, are generally known to have contained red brick buildings, probably remains of churches (Budge, 1907; MacMichael, 1920; Balfour-Paul, 1952).

Geteina. This is the only known site in the White Nile valley. It is a large occupation of red brick construction. Among the surface materials are three inscribed red bricks, small bowls of fine ware with stamped medallions, a clay spindle whorl, and one stone archer's loose. Some of the potsherds have an incised red-filled ornament similar to those at Abu Geili (village site). Most of the sherds consist of burnished ware in black, red, brown, and grey (Crawford, 1961). Crawford made no mention of possible dating for the material.

4. The Qoz Region

Geologically, the word "Qoz" is applied to the dune-like accumulations in Kordofan. It is used here to designate the area which lies to the west of the White Nile as far as Darfur and the adjacent areas (see Map VIII). The few recorded archaeological sites of this region are summarized below.

Abu Sufyan. This site lies in the grassy land of northern Kordofan. It consists of two circular structures of red brick, one approximately 7 m in diameter and the other approximately 12.5 m in diameter; and one discontinuous stone circle 10 m in diameter (Shaw, 1936:324). According to Shaw, the constructed area consists of a roughly circular, flat-topped mound whose sides are formed of stepped-up courses of red brick. The bricks were laid in alternate courses of headers and stretchers.

Besides these structures, there are a number of graves, and rock pictures showing both animal and human figures. The main animal depicted is the camel, together with giraffes, antelopes, horses, and other indeterminate animals. No specific date has been suggested for these pictographs. Among the human figures are spearmen, in some cases bearing shields and horned or double-plumed headdresses (Newbold, 1920:77). Other finds consist of pilgrim bottles similar to those found at Soba. The presence of these bottles led Newbold to conclude that Abu Sufyan was a Christian occupation. This view seems to have been accepted by a number of authorities including Crawford (1951), Arkell (1959), and Chittick (1963). Newbold (1920) also stated that the bricks at Abu Sufyan are almost exact replicas of those at Zankor, and that these, in turn, are the same as those of the Ain Farah district. No other diagnostic evidence has been found apart from the pilgrim bottles.

Zankor. This site lies at the foot of Jebel Zankor in western Kordofan about 270 km south of Abu Sufyan. It is composed of 1.4 ha of mounds whose surface is covered with both red and sun-dried bricks, together with a few broken stone pillars, and slabs of building stone. The site was considered, by Penn (1931:179), to be the remains of a town built of red brick and stone, surrounded by inner and outer defensive walls.

The excavation of one of the mounds of the main enclosure revealed the existence of twelve pillars arranged in a circle—eleven forming the circumference and one in the centre. The circle is approximately 4 m in diameter (Penn, 1931). Another mound appears to consist of the remains of two rooms built of both red and sun-dried bricks. Associated with these rooms are ostrich eggshell beads, pestles and mortars, bones of domestic animals, iron ore, iron hoes, querns, and large quantities of potsherds as well as complete pots. Among the complete pots are cups,

jars, hemispherical bowls and dishes, all of which were tentatively dated, by Addison, to the seventh century A.D.

Ain Farah. In this site, which lies in northern Darfur, two potsherds and a glass window pane were found. One of the potsherds is of hard light pink ware, covered with a white slip upon which a cross and a fish are painted. The other sherd is of hard red ware, burnished on one side, and stamped with an impressed design with a cross. In Arkell's view, "the discovery of these sherds at Ain Farah clearly indicates that the building in which they were found was a church and not a mosque, and this explains some of its unusual features" (Arkell, 1959:115). The structure of the church appears to belong to the domed basilica variety, those which end in an apse, and there are aisles and structures which could have supported a dome. These L-shaped supporting pillars added to the shape of the church. Arkell went on to describe one of the buildings in the hilly area, which includes Ain Farah, as a monastery, without giving any evidence to support this proposition. In accordance with his hypothesis that Ain Farah was a church, Arkell cited some of the cultural practices which appearred to be a reflection of Christian faith, as recorded by MacMichael (1920) and Dupuis (1929). The former stated that "the Tungur of Darfur brought with them from Christian Nubia the recollection of certain church rites, in particular the sign of the Cross" (MacMichael, 1920:32). The latter suggested that the rite was "a survival in which baptism and the representation of the stigmata are curiously remembered and confounded" (Dupuis, 1929:112). However, Arkell argued that, while the full implications of the realization that Ain Farah is a Christian site had yet to be worked out, the large red bricks which occur at Ain Farah are, nevertheless, typical of Soba construction (Arkell, 1959:118). It is not clear whether Ain Farah is within the boundaries of the kingdom of Dongola, or within those of the kingdom of Alwa.

D. Conclusion

The preceding was a summary of the known archaeology of the kingdom of Alwa. As is clear from the above presentation, comparatively little data are available beyond a few instances of surface collection. This has undoubtedly caused our picture of the period under consideration to be distorted and incomplete. There are many sites, but they raise more questions than they answer: How do these sites relate to each other? What time periods are represented? Are different time periods evidenced in any one site? To be sure, the archaeology of the kingdom of Alwa is still largely at the initial stage. This is particularly unfortunate in light of the historical importance of the region as a transition zone between the forest economies to the south and the large trade centres to the north, along the Nile valley. The cultural and linguistic composition of the central Sudan

is complex and often ambiguous, and the role of archaeology will be critical in establishing patterns of population movement and cultural contacts.

However, despite the severe limitations of the available data, a few generalizations can be drawn. The evidence of pottery and beads illustrates that Soba was not beleaguered and isolated, but shared the regional culture of the period. Soba was apparently involved in the regional trade which embraced Saqadi, and perhaps also Abu Geili to the south, and other sites which await discovery and excavation, if not overrun by the Gezira Irrigation Scheme. In this connection, it would appear that the chemical analysis of glass and faience will prove to be of considerable interest and may provide insight into trade patterns. Standardization of descriptions within each dig and between sites would greatly facilitate the study of this material.

The distribution of Soba ware to as far north as the Abu Hamed district indicates that Soba's influence was not limited to the Gezira region alone. It is apparent from the description of the archaeological sites in the Middle Nile region that graveyards are widespread. The great number of tombs suggests a large population distributed through the region during the mediaeval period, but the actual size of the settlements cannot be estimated at present.

With regard to the great number of castles, forts, and other defensive buildings, it is reasonable to conclude that there was, over this period, an expected danger, and that the region was of great importance during the mediaeval period. The castle certainly had a considerable role to play in the administration of the district and, no doubt, castles were the seats of administrative figures, possibly a ruling elite or aristocracy. The location and distribution of these castles leads archaeologists to credit the claims that the northern boundaries of Alwa were somewhere in the vicinity of Abu Hamed. The construction of the defensive sites suggests unfriendly relations with the kingdom of Makouria, referred to in our discussion of the written sources.

Scant as it is, the evidence points to a substantial pattern of cultural continuity from the Meroitic to the mediaeval periods and the present day. This continuity is reflected in the material culture, through a similar pattern of variability, in such aspects as settlement patterns, house design and structures, and ceramic and utilitarian objects, such as wooden and metal implements. The evidence has also shown the existence of literacy during the period.

UNMARKED FAMILY

3 / *The Sociocultural and the Economic Basis of the Kingdom of Alwa*

IN THIS CHAPTER, a model of the social and cultural structure of Alwa will be presented that goes somewhat beyond the material and historical evidence. Much that is contained in this part is speculative, but is within accepted archaeological limits. The presentation is intended to shed light on the nature of the Alwan state, its political organization, its social and religious patterns, and the economic and subsistence strategies of its inhabitants. Underlying this aspect of the analysis is the hypothesis of continuity in Nubian cultural history. Following this mode of inquiry, one of the main forms of argument will be extrapolation by analogy from other known and perhaps better documented cases. For example, the history of the Fung sultanate (Spaulding, 1971; 1974); the model developed by O'Fahey in *State and society in Darfur* (1980); and the direct historical analogy approach adopted by Osman (1978) in his study of Dongola.

Utilizing these approaches does not imply that the cases are identical. Of course, the historical processes in each case were unique, governed by certain specific circumstances. It is nonetheless possible to reveal a number of general patterns or regularities in the historical processes. Since, more or less, the same cultural continuum is being discussed, it is proposed that the operationalization of these models will provide an informed guess as to the general pattern of the Alwan state. Of necessity, the interpretation will rest upon the relatively meagre archaeological data and the descriptive evidence of the Arab geographers.

It is important to keep in mind that only some aspects of social institutions will be examined. To establish firmly the nature of these institutions, which constitute a complex web, or network, of mutual interactions in the society, is impossible, given the present state of our knowledge. While this examination is only speculative, it is quite possible to identify, at least, the more conspicuous strands and fibres of Alwan social fabric.

A. The Economy and Commerce of Mediaeval Alwa

There is no human society in which each person is entirely self-sufficient, performing all the jobs necessary for their own subsistence, depending upon no one, supporting no one. An important problem of human behavior is how people cooperate in obtaining their means of subsistence. In

this regard, it is important to consider the geographical setting, subsistence technologies, and commerce in mediaeval Alwa.

1. Geographical Setting

The most certain facts about mediaeval Alwa are geographical. The area under consideration can be divided into four main ecological zones:

The Northern Region. This designates the area between Abu Hamed in the north and Khartoum in the south. It comprises the Nile valley itself and the adjacent areas of alluvial land. The region is clearly divisible into reaches of greater and lesser productivity and wealth, which are largely determined by the nature of the rocks across which the river flows. Moreover, there are many basins alongside the Nile. In Shendi Reach, these are to be found almost continuously, from the Sixth Cataract to Atbara in the north, on one side of the river (Barbour, 1961:133). The basins are floored with silt and clay and, at a high Nile, many are flooded, either naturally or else through artificial channels. The main human adaptive feature, which distinguishes this riverine subsistence economy from those which adjoin it, is the complete reliance on irrigation rather than rainfall.

The Eastern Region. East of the alluvial plain, the landscape gives way to the slightly higher Butana grassland. The Butana is classified as a grassland in the sense that trees and bushes are almost absent, except for stands along the wadis, *khors*, and watercourses (Worrall, 1959:35). The grasses and brush are the same as those growing along the alluvial plain, except for species occurring on the inundated flood-plain. Today, this Butana vegetation provides the best rainy season pasture for domestic animals kept by the tribes in the area.

There are two patterns of pastoral transhumance today: short east-west movements between the Nile and its adjacent hinterland, and long movements between the northern Butana and the south. The former type is characterized by movements towards the Nile when the river recedes. The flush of green pasture on the moist river bank provides important fodder at the time when the grasses away from the river are dried up (Barbour, 1961:81). The latter type of pastoral production is characterized by north-south migrations between areas of heavier rainfall in the southern part of the Butana and the drier parts of northern Butana. The northern Butana can be best exploited for pastoral production in the rainy season. In the dry season, shortages of pasture and water force the pastoralists to move to other areas of the Butana, i.e., towards the Nile or towards the wetter parts of the southern Butana. Evidence of the historic economic importance of the rainland is provided by the numerous *hafirs* ("artificial depressions") which stretch south of Meroe in the Butana.

Most of these *hafirs* are found in association with Meroitic occupation in the Butana and are assumed to be of Meroitic origin.

The Central Clay Plains. This area includes the heavy clay soils of the Gezira and the southern rainland cultivation regions. As rainfall increases southward, farmers rely increasingly on crops watered by rainfall. Occasional cultivation away from the Nile begins as far north as Atbara, but only south of the confluence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile does rainfall permit this form of cultivation to become the economic mainstay. Even in the southern region, farmers must depend on the Nile during the dry season, and irrigated cultivation extends as far south as Sennar. The central clay plains also support cattle or mixed cattle-camel nomadism. Like the Butana pastoralists, the southern herdsmen congregate along rivers during the dry season and disperse during the rains. The more generous southern environment reduces the dependency of the nomads upon the cultivators.

The Western Region. A ubiquitous feature of this region is the absence of perennial streams, which means that during the dry season men and animals are confined to such limited areas as lie within the reach of permanent pools or wells. According to differences of structure, soil, climate, and vegetation, the region is subdivided by Barbour (1961:148) into three principal subregions whose boundaries are determined by physical features:

i. The Camel-Nomad or the Semi-Desert Belt of Northern Kordofan. The grazing available here is provided by both annual and perennial grasses. These have often been eliminated near water-holes by grazing.

ii. The Qoz Belt. This subregion takes its name from the *qoz* patches or ridges, basically sand-dunes of light soil more easily cultivated than the heavy clay soils. The northern limit of this belt coincides approximately with the transition from the semi-desert to the low-rainfall woodland savanna (Barbour, 1961:157). This line lies to the north of the limit of permanent settlement and sedentary agriculture. In the Qoz, the ground is gently undulating, covered with a mantle of grasses and herbs, and short, scattered trees whose size and density increase gradually from north to south. The Qoz is characterized by the predominance of hashab (*Acacia senegal*), which yields gum arabic. Where rainfall increases to 800 mm, the Qoz is characterized by a distinct socioeconomic adaptation—cattle pastoralism (Barbour, 1961:160).

iii. The Nuba Mountains. This area consists of a number of isolated hill-masses which serve as refuge areas. The climate of these mountains closely resembles that of the surrounding plains, but because of the relatively high elevation of the hill-masses (to about 1,524 m above sea-level), they receive greater rainfall than the plains below; hence, they can support a dense population (Barbour, 1961:173). The economy of the

Nuba Mountains includes stock raising and more intensive types of cultivation than are practised on the plains.

These regions were the main ecological zones of the kingdom of Alwa. They represent three distinct patterns of subsistence: riverine agriculture, rainland cultivation, and nomadic pastoralism or transhumance. These modes of adaptation, which are more or less an integral part of Alwan human ecology, are clearly reflected in the ethnographic accounts of mediaeval Arab geographers. This suggests that there have been few significant changes in the regional socio-geographical and economic patterns; thus, the present bears witness to the past.

However, it is important to raise the question as to what degree modern ecological adaptations may, with accuracy, be projected into the distant past. In this region, the most significant factors would be the variation in precipitation and fluctuations in the Nile discharge. With regard to the former factor, it is generally agreed that:

> Since at least 3000 B.C. fluctuations in rainfall over Lower Nubia have been of very small amplitude. None has been sufficient to effect the ecology of the region. These fluctuations may have had greater influence upon the resources available to the pastoralists in the Red Sea Hills. . . . There appears to have been slightly more rainfall and more abundant vegetation in the Eastern Desert in the last century than there has been since. (Trigger, 1970:352)

It is apparent that fluctuations in the height of the Nile floods are of far greater importance than rainfall fluctuations. Adams proposed that relatively long-term fluctuations in the height of the Nile floods have played an important role in the cultural history of Nubia. He interpreted the archaeological history of Phase III at Meinarti, in Lower Nubia (seventh to ninth centuries A.D.) as evidence of one long battle against a rising river (Adams, 1967). It would seem that fluctuations in the height of the Nile floods can make life very difficult in Nubia, but never impossible:

> Anybody familiar with the present day Nubian way of life would know that there are ways of solving this problem. In seasons of low floods, a number of *shadufs* or *saqias* would be established, placed at a suitable interval, each supply the other with water until the well of the main *shaduf* or *saqia* is full. . . . Another method to overcome low floods is to dig up a canal between the Nile and the well of the *saqia*. (Osman, 1978:50-51)

On the other hand, even a single high flood may have a considerable impact on the settlement. This was the case in 1946, when the river damaged many houses built near the edge of the flood plain. Because of

this, many houses were abandoned and new ones were built on higher ground. Also, the effect of individual or prolonged high floods on various localities may be entirely different depending on the topography and what happened to the adjacent flood plain.

This brief summary of the ecological conditions of northern Nubia goes a long way towards justifying the hypothesis of ecological continuity for the area and the period under consideration. Given the continuity of environment, it is reasonable to infer that the economic patterns described above, with their dependence on the Nile, rainfall, and vegetation, might also be regarded as relatively stable and, therefore, applicable in general terms to the kingdom of Alwa. It is also fair to conclude that the same methods of reconstruction used by Osman for northern Nubia are, with some modification, also applicable to southern Nubia.

The next step is to examine the technology or the means by which culture adapts to its physical environment. From the discussion of the basic subsistence systems and their stability through time, it can be argued that the kingdom of Alwa was characterized by at least three modes of socioeconomic adaptation.

2. Subsistence Technologies

Subsistence technologies are the activities which people perform to exploit their environment in order to gain a livelihood. There are three basic subsistence technologies which have been, and still are, practised in the area formerly the domain of the kingdom of Alwa: Nile agriculture, rainland cultivation, and animal husbandry.

Nile Agriculture. The subsistence technologies of mediaeval Nubia consisted of productive techniques such as means of hoisting water for irrigation, means of water conduction, tools for irrigation, and economic organization (Osman, 1978). The concept of subsistence technology has operational utility because it relates a particular social and economic structure to a particular kind of natural environment and can be applied throughout the Nile valley from Lower Nubia to as far south as the Gezira region.

The most ancient techniques of irrigation known in the Sudan are flush irrigation and *shaduf* irrigation. Flush irrigation is essentially a development of natural flooding. It is the simplest form of irrigation, being merely a simple soaking of the land during the season of high flood. Modern examples of this type of irrigation are found in the deltas of the Gash and Baraka rivers (see Map IX), though strictly speaking there is no irrigation in the sense of definite control of the flooding. Both these rivers, rising in the mountains of Eritrea, have formed large deltas of their own silt deposits which provide soil of great depth and fertility.

Both grow excellent crops of long-staple cotton, millet, and other food crops (Allan and Smith, 1948:618).

Although nothing is known about the agricultural activities of the Nubians, prior to about 2,000 B.C., it seems likely that they practised the system of *seluka* cultivation (Osman, 1978:55). A *seluka* is a digging-stick with a foot-rest. The term is also applied to land cultivation. As the Nile flood subsides annually, it leaves a wide strip of moist and fertile silt which is hurriedly planted with a variety of crops. This type of cultivation, calling for a minimum expenditure of effort, is easily the most popular along the Nile valley and is still widely used despite the introduction of pumping schemes at the turn of the present century. The most important crops grown by *seluka* cultivation are sorghum, wheat, barley, haricot beans, dukhn (*Pennisetum americanum*), and animal fodder. *Seluka* cultivation is not limited to the Nile valley but also is found in the Gezira, where the sowing of cotton is carried out using the *seluka* method (MacKinnon, 1948:781).

The most ancient mechanical means of hoisting water known, still used in some parts of the Sudan, is the *shaduf*. Evidence of this comes from New Kingdom Egypt and it is assumed to have been known in contemporary Nubia (Osman, 1978:56). This is a very primitive, but quite effective, means of lifting water by manpower, usually from a pool, canal, or river. This method, worked by one man, would have an output of 24–30 cubic metres a day, which would suffice for one-half to two-thirds of a *feddan* (one *feddan* is equal to 0.42 ha) of vegetables, the main type of crop for which this system would be used. This mechanical device can be easily installed, operated, and maintained. *Shaduf* cultivation is not restricted to the river Nile, but it is also used along the Atbara, Rahad, and Dinder rivers to the east of the Gezira.

A more advanced mechanical device for lifting water for irrigation is the *saqia*, or the Persian water-wheel, which has been the mainstay of agriculture throughout the Nile valley, from the Hellenistic period until the turn of the present century. The *saqia*, which has probably remained unchanged for centuries, is widely distributed in the Sudan, from the Gezira along the Blue Nile and White Nile, along the Atbara River, and the Gash River in the Kassala district, as well as in Kordofan. Evidence of *saqia* cultivation during the period under consideration is attested by the *saqia* pots found at Soba and the historical account of Ibn Hawqal.

As a waterlifting device, the *saqia* has certain points in its favour which account for its persistence in the area. It is made entirely of local materials: wood, ropes, and leather. It is powered by domestic animals and is a self-contained unit.

The area which the *saqia* can irrigate varies considerably with the lift. At a high Nile, the *saqia* can irrigate approximately 1.6 to 2 ha and 0.61 to 1 ha at low Nile (Allan and Smith, 1948:628). The advantage of the

saqia is that the farmer can grow several crops a year (mainly sorghum, wheat, fruits, vegetables, beans, and fodder) instead of the single crop produced without irrigation.

The only difficulty lies in the actual building of the *saqia*, and establishing the water flow through the system of canals. In modern times, this is done on a communal basis, and this is probably a reflection of much earlier practices (Osman, 1978:58). A number of shareholders agree to take part in a *saqia* and each contributes towards the collection of the necessary materials. When the *saqia* is established, each receives an equal period of irrigation for his own field and is responsible for certain minor repairs, such as maintaining the ropes or the *saqia* pots. This institution, according to Osman, is called *toddan* (a Nubian word). The building of the main trough and the main channels is done by means of *feza* or *nafeer*, "communal labour." The people who join the *nafeer* are not paid but expect to be well fed and provided with plenty to drink.

Another institution related to the *saqia* is the *torba* system, which already existed in the mediaeval period. A *torba* (a Nubian word) is a farmer who cultivates someone else's land and is paid in kind for his services, but who has no ownership rights over the land nor over the irrigation equipment (Osman, 1978:61). Evidence for this is provided from a decree found at Nawri, in the region of the Third Cataract and dated to the twelfth century A.D.

The above-mentioned institutions are not peculiar to Nubia proper. The same kind of socioeconomic adaptation that Osman described operates in southern Nubia at the present time and can be taken as a continuation of an earlier cultural tradition. It is interesting to note that the same institutions, with their Nubian names, are known from the Shendi district (Paul, 1936:348) and from my own village, al-Bauga, which lies some 24 km above the Fifth Cataract. In this connection, it should be noted that the introduction of mechanical pumps (most of which are operated cooperatively) in the early twentieth century does not seem to have affected the earlier institution of the *saqia*. The introduction of motor-driven pumps increased the yield of irrigated areas, and hence led to more production and greater stability. Yet the local community retains its older agricultural practices. There is a strong fabric of social relationships linked with the *saqia* system, involving not only bonds of kinship and fictive kinship but also other bonds, such as those created by joint participation in communal work and common residence. This fabric of relationships is part of a larger sociocultural pattern and may be regarded as an element of the pan-Nubian cultural tradition.

Rainlands Cultivation. The "Granary of the Sudan" is the name given to the most productive rainland region of the country, the belt of land stretching from the Ethiopian border in the east to Darfur in the west, roughly occupying the area between isohyets of 300 and 800 mm

(Agabawi, 1968:71). This vast expanse of approximately 40.5 million ha, which constituted the heartland of the kingdom of Alwa, is made up of two distinct types of soil, the Qoz sand soils and the clay soils of the central clay plains. Evidence for rainfall cultivation during mediaeval Alwa is to be seen in the descriptive evidence of al-Aswani. At present, the most important foci of this economic pattern are the Gedaref region of eastern Sudan, the Singa district in southern Gezira, and the Nuba Mountains in Kordofan.

About 80 percent of the total crops in the Sudan, especially sorghum, sesame, millet, *ful sudani* ("ground nuts"), and cotton, are produced within the rain belt. In this region grain crops are divided into "early" and "late" and each has its peculiarities. The early-sown sorghum is a quick-maturing variety which ripens in two and a half to three and a half months. This is usually sown immediately after the first good rain of the season. The crop is harvested in July and August and provides grain for three months of the year, during a period when normally no other grain would be available (Burnett, 1948:290). These early crops are generally sown around or near the houses where they can get more attention and often receive a certain amount of manure as well as organic matter from household refuse and ashes. After cutting, many varieties of early-maturing sorghum will produce a second crop.

The late-sown crop consists of slow-maturing varieties which may take up to four months to ripen. These constitute the main grain crops of the area and are not sown until the rains have been well established. The slow-maturing sorghum is seldom sown around the houses but is always grown on the best available land, which may be several miles away from the village. This production system involves a communal work force in which the villagers gather to perform the cultivation as well as the harvesting. The system of shifting cultivation and the unreliable practice of *hariq* cultivation were likely the main systems of plant-crop culture in the Alwan rainland, as attested from the present-day situation. *Hariq* cultivation is a form of shifting agriculture in which fire is set to the old grass, which then burns the potential weed crop of the season. The sorghum crop is then sown and no further weeding is required. This considerably reduces the working costs and, at the same time, produces excellent yields.

In a system of shifting agriculture, certain areas are brought under cultivation for a time and then the farmer moves to new ground, preferably untouched. After a particular area in the bush has been cleared for cultivation, the ground is sown year after year with the same crop (such as sorghum or sesame) until disease or a greatly reduced yield forces the owner to move elsewhere. The move consists of clearing an adjoining area and the process continues until the original farm (generally about

1 ha) has regained most of its fertility and can be brought back into cultivation (Burnett, 1948:292).

The main implements used for both these forms of cultivation are very simple. They consist of the *torea* ("digging hoe"), the *malod* ("weeding hoe"), the *nigama* ("a short-handed weeding hoe"), the *mungal* ("a short saw-edged blade fitted to a short wooden handle"), an axe, some sort of knife for harvesting, and a forked stick for use as a rake. The use of iron tools from Meroitic times must have influenced the development of agriculture in the northern and central Sudan. Threshing is normally done with a flail, or spear shaft, or with an implement rather like a cricket bat, on a specially prepared threshing floor. The floor may be nothing more than a cleared area of well-beaten earth, or it may consist of a mixture of mud and cow dung allowed to harden and dry.

In this region, grain, and particularly sorghum, is the only crop which is normally stored for any length of time. Reserves may be stored for two years or more. There are two recognized methods of storage: in pits below the ground, or in large storage jars similar to those found at Soba. The pits are called *matmura* and may be of any size. The most common sized *matmura* will hold 15–20 ardebs, or 2,970–3,960 l.

Although the plough was known and used by the Egyptians from the early dynastic period as well as in Ethiopia during the Axumite period, there is no direct evidence for the use of the plough in mediaeval Alwa. The existence of the plough during this period is suggested by Abu Salih (see Chapter 1, p. 23).

Despite the introduction of mechanized farming and cultivation in this century, all the afore-mentioned methods of cultivation are still used today.

Animal Husbandry. The last important means of livelihood in mediaeval Alwa was the herding of livestock, which implies the existence of a distinct pastoral element in Alwan culture. Besides cultivation, the rainland environment supported a transhumant way of life—a mixed economy of keeping stock and agriculture. However, the contribution of this mode of subsistence (which is clearly reflected in the descriptive evidence of the Arab writers) to the economy of the kingdom of Alwa is not, as yet, fully understood. Al-Aswani stated that "the people of Alwa have plenty of meat because of the abundance of cattle and large plains, for grazing plain lands are so vast that it takes several days to reach the mountains" (al-Aswani, in Mus'ad, 1972). In his description, Ibn Hawqal made a clear distinction between the agriculturalists and the nomads, when he said,

> This country includes the river known as Sensabi . . . and the river which is known as Al-Dujn. . . . There are in Dujn continuous villages which have water, trees, agriculture and animals . . . to the centre of this valley is Taflien which has seasonal villages for bedouins, who occupy

> them during the rainy season for pasture. . . . They are not agriculturalists but they breed camels and cattle. . . . The Taflien people are neighbours to the Bazin, a people who live in groups of straw huts which look like villages. (Ibn Hawqal, in Mus'ad, 1972)

It seems clear from this citation that Ibn Hawqal is referring to the habitat of the present-day southern Bisharin, the Bani-Amer, and the Shukria. The southern Bisharin, situated along both banks of the Atbara river, live in conditions more favoured by river and rainfall and, consequently, are better provided with small stock and cattle in addition to camels. Such a pattern is also reflected in the account of al-Aswani. The coastal region lying between Tokar (see Map IX) and the Ethiopian frontier also affords good grazing conditions and forms the main winter and spring pasture for the Sudanese section of the Bani-Amer. The southern Butana plains are presently occupied by the Shukria, who breed camels and, in addition, have large herds of goats and flocks of sheep (MacKinnon, 1948).

The implication of these observations is that in the proximity of these areas (formerly part of the domain of Alwa), animal husbandry made possible a diverse and large-scale economic organization and thus we may assume that pastoralism played as large a part in the economy of Alwa, as did agriculture. The account of Ibn Hawqal clearly indicates the presence of full-time nomadic pastoralism, which is still practised in the Butana today, as well as in southern Gezira (Ahmed, 1972), along the west bank of the White Nile (Mohamed, 1980), in Darfur (Haaland, 1972), and in Kordofan (Cunnison, 1966 and Asad, 1970). Archaeological evidence for this was found in Shinnie's excavations of Meroe, which confirmed that a good deal of meat was consumed by the local inhabitants. This evidence lends support to al-Aswani's account since it suggests that pastoralism was already established in Meroitic times.

One more product of animal husbandry should be mentioned: leather. It seems unlikely that Alwan people dressed to any extent in skins, but leather was undoubtedly used in considerable quantities for sandals, belts, quivers, bags, *saqia* equipment, and harnessware, as was the case during the Meroitic period (Millet, 1968:30), the Fung sultanate (Burekhardt, 1819), and in the present day. The export of rawhide seems to have been important to the commercial economy of the kingdom of Alwa, according to the twelfth century A.D. account of Benjamin of Rudela (Hess, 1965:22). At present, rawhide comprises one of the most important exports of the Sudan.

In summary, it is reasonable to infer that Alwans were engaged in agriculture and stock breeding, exactly the same types of occupations that are practised at the present time. Large herds of cattle, sheep, camels, and goats were kept. Given the fertility of the land and the large quantities of crops in production, it seems clear that agriculture in Alwa meant not

only livelihood or subsistence, but also a basis for wealth and power, since agricultural products constituted one of the important items of the Alwan commercial economy.

3. Commerce in Mediaeval Alwa

It is evident that the economy of Nubia was more complex during the Meroitic period than it had been before. There is evidence of extensive agriculture and herding of cattle, goats, and sheep (Shinnie, 1967:158). Among the main crops cultivated were wheat, barley, lentils, melons, gourds, fruits, and cotton (Hakem, 1981:310). The cultivation of cotton and the spinning and weaving techniques reached a very high level of development. It has even been maintained that the export of textiles was one of the sources of Meroe's wealth (Crowfoot, cited in Hakem, 1981:311).

There was also an extensive iron-working industry. The fortunate local occurrence of two basic requirements, iron ore (easily available from the ironstone formation which caps the hills of the northern Sudan and the Island of Meroe) and fuel (from the groves of acacia trees growing along the Nile) made this industry possible. Gold production must likewise have been an important occupation in the Merotic empire, and the temples seem to have owned large quantities of it. Taharqa is known to have endowed one of his numerous temples with 110 kg of gold in nine years (Vercoutter, 1959:137).

In later years, Meroe traded widely with Ptolemaic Egypt. It exported gold and iron in considerable quantities, and it also controlled and regulated trade in ebony, ivory, incense, and leopard skins between the African interior and the Hellenic world.

It can be argued that it was the location of the trade routes, particularly the great axis running from east to west through Soba, which accounts for the commercial role that appears to have been played by Alwa throughout its history. In addition to trading activity, the ecological complexity of the kingdom of Alwa made possible economic specializations and interrelationships within its ethnically diverse population. This may have stimulated the development of a political system that extended beyond the tribe to regulate these relationships and trade. Such political regulations both facilitated long-distance trade (by insuring an area of order and tranquillity) and permitted multiple exploitation of the same land by nomads and farmers by scheduling their access and by providing means for the resolution of disputes.

The Nile and its tributaries enhanced the development of permanent settlements, as is reflected in both the archaeological and ethnographic evidence. This, in turn, encouraged the development of crafts. Some of the Nile Valley urban centres, such as Soba, Arbaji, Abu Geili, Saqadi,

and others in the northern part of the kingdom, were so situated that they occupied natural locations for trade with their hinterlands and with other trading communities. Many of them must also have played a role as administrative and religious centres.

The arts and industries of Alwa can be divided into two categories: household crafts and local utilitarian manufactures. The first category includes spinning and weaving, basket making, and the production of handmade pottery. These were presumably activities of Alwan women. Archaeological evidence so far suggests that they were carried on in every village, if not in every household.

Localized industries would be those which produced utilitarian goods for local consumption: implements and containers of iron, leather, wood, and wheel-made pottery. It is assumed that these items were locally produced in each district. There must therefore have been a considerable number of full-time or part-time specialists who earned a living as blacksmiths, leather workers, carpenters and potters.

At some periods, the position held by the kingdom of Alwa in African commerce was that of a major trading power, as evidenced by the mining of the gold and the production of many other commercial articles. The economic importance of certain raw materials is suggested by the rivalry between the Noba and the Axumites. Most probably it was the search for raw materials for export (possibly including gold) which brought the two kingdoms into competition.

The development of the commercial economy of the kingdom of Alwa may be attributed to four main factors: export trade, river navigation routes, Red Sea ports, and caravan routes.

i. Export Trade. There are good reasons for assuming that Alwa's economic mainstay was the export of certain raw materials, some of which the country possessed, and others to which it had direct access: gold, ivory, salt, slaves, and other exotic, tropical products. Certainly this was true during Meroitic times and, later, during the Fung and Darfur sultanates, as it was also true of other empires of the Saharan fringe.

Gold is attested by Cosmas in the sixth century A.D., and by Ibn Hawqal in the tenth century A.D. (see also the description by al-Aswani, in Chapter 1, p. 20). The gold trade of Fazughli, on the borders of the Sudan and Ethiopia, evidently goes back to the sixth century A.D. for, when Cosmas Indicopleustes was at Adulis, on the Red Sea Coast, just before A.D. 522, he heard of such trade (Wainwright, 1942:52). It was the production of gold in this area which seems to account for the conflict between the Axumites and the Noba (as reflected in the inscription of Ezana). The Fazughli region, which is now inhabited by the eastern Sudanic group (the so-called Anag, mentioned above) may well have been a gold and slave trading centre looking northward down the Nile

valley. It was once a district of the kingdom of Alwa and later became one of the indispensable provinces of Sennar during the seventeenth century A.D. Oral accounts, collected in some villages in the Soba area by the present writer, point to the fact that during the Turkish and Mahdist rule, the salt traders of Soba obtained gold and slaves from the Fazughli area. The gold, which was marketed in Roseires and Kurmuk at the beginning of this century, was estimated to be worth 50,000 pounds sterling a year (Arkell, 1944:31).

Another source of gold was the Nuba Mountains (or al-Ahdin) as related by Ibn Hawqal, who stated ". . . these nations are called al-Ahdin. Rich mines of pure gold and iron are found in their country" (Vantini, 1975:166). It is possible that the struggle between the Fung and the Kayra (i.e., Darfur sultanate) for control of Kordofan in the second half of the eighteenth century A.D. had an economic cause, namely the control of the trade routes and the flow of gold from southern Kordofan (O'Fahey, 1971:94). Until recently, gold was sold in the Nuba Mountains by weight, the principal articles of barter being cattle, beads, and iron (Dunn, 1921:139 and Bell, 1937:129).

ii. River Navigation Routes. A very important feature of the region of Alwa is the abundance of partly navigable rivers which form a complete network over the entire country. Some of them, such as the Blue Nile and White Nile, flow all year around and are navigable. Others, such as the Rahad, Dinder, and Atbara rivers, flow only during the rainy seasons for four or five months (June to October). During this season, they permit navigation only downstream, as the current is too strong for upstream navigation. Boats or rafts going down river nowadays are eventually sold as timber. The existence of boats, which would have facilitated the transportation of goods within this vast area during mediaeval times, is clearly reflected in the inscription of Ezana and in the descriptions of al-Aswani.

iii. Red Sea Ports. The establishment of the Red Sea ports seems to have had a far-reaching effect on the commercial economy of the kingdom of Alwa. From the earliest times, the Red Sea was used as a trade route between Egypt and the lands of Punt and Arabia. A number of ports were also established during the Ptolemaic era. Famous among these was Ptolemais which Crowfoot (1911a:532) identified with the present-day Akik (see Map IX). Crowfoot stated:

> In this sea-borne traffic watering stations were as indispensable as coaling stations are today, and at convenient intervals along the shores of the Red Sea, the merchantmen of Himyar and Saba must have had their ports-of-call in which to replenish their stock of drinking-water and escape from ugly weather. But for the position and character of the ports we can argue only from the analogy of later days. (Crowfoot, 1911a:524)

The Red Sea ports became important trading centres during the seventh century A.D., when Islam become popularized in Egypt. The islands of the Red Sea, which were used by early Caliphs as penal stations, soon became centres of flourishing mercantile communities (Kay, in Crowfoot, 1911a:547).

Badi and Aidhab were among the important ports along the shores of the Red Sea during the mediaeval period (see Map IX). Badi, which flourished between the mid-seventh to mid-twelfth centuries A.D., was not merely a watering-station but a sea port with trade of its own. This can be explained by its location near the first point at which voyagers from the south, and the last point at which voyagers from the north, could find easy access to the hinterland of the eastern Sudan (Crowfoot, 1911a:545). The geographical conditions of Badi are sufficient to prove that the peculiar and abiding significance of the region is that it commands the easiest outlet from the Kassala-Gallabat-Gedarif district and much of the country further inland. It is evident from the descriptive accounts of Ibn Hawqal and al-Aswani that Alwa had come into renewed commercial contact with the outside world through the activities of the Arab merchants.

Although Aidhab might have been an ancient port, it did not attain any great prosperity until the second half of the eleventh century A.D., when first the eastern trade, then the pilgrim traffic, was diverted to it by the closure of the overland route. Proof of contact between Alwan and Red Sea ports is provided by archaeological evidence from Soba, Abu Geili, and Saqadi. In this context, it is reasonable to assume that the kings of Alwa had appointed agents in Badi and Aidhab to look after their exports and imports.

iv. Caravan Routes. The last factor to have played an important role in the commercial economy of Alwa was the caravan routes. The camel was introduced into Nubia during the period of the Meroitic kingdom (Robinson, in Osman, 1978:125). Camels seem to have gained their real commercial importance with the rise of the kingdom of Alwa and to have reached their peak during the Fung and Darfur sultanates. The caravan routes gained importance (see Map X) during the kingdom of Alwa due to the vast territory of the kingdom, as well as to the high productivity of commercial goods in the region.

Alwa, linked together and to the outside world by desert caravan routes, appears to present many parallels with the empires which arose in Central and Western Africa in the wake of the trans-Saharan caravan trade. From ancient times until the Industrial Revolution, most of the world's peoples remained more or less self-sufficient in utilitarian goods, whereas, by contrast, it was the long-distance trade in luxuries which was the economic mainstay of pre-industrial empires. In this sense, it is likely

that a conspicuous feature of royalty in the kingdom of Alwa—as in the Fung and Darfur sultanates and the kingdoms of the western Sudan—would have been a concern for long-distance trade in luxury or strategic items of low bulk and high value. Some writers have proposed that trade in luxury goods was a necessary and sufficient cause for the rise of centralized kingdoms in mediaeval Sudan. On the one hand, commerce in exotic products required substantial political organization and international diplomacy, which a centralized state could provide, while, on the other hand, it made available valuable goods to the Sudanic king with which to reward his supporters and elevate the status of his court above the lifestyle of his subjects (Spaulding, 1971; O'Fahey, 1980; Horowitz, 1967).

Whatever the case might have been, it is apparent that foreign trade was more important to the kingdom of Alwa than to the kingdom of Dongola. Benjamin, whose itinerary is one of our sources of information about the economic history of Northeast Africa during the twelfth century A.D., was keenly interested in trade routes and commodities to be found in commerce. He stated that "I would add the lesser known route from the Nile tributaries, from Alwa, to the north-west to Zawila in the Fezzan" (Benjamin, in Hess, 1965:22). Evidently Zawila, like Zabid in the Yemen, was an entrepot for merchants from the Nile valley, North Africa, and the western and central Sudan. According to Hess (1965:22), this must have been a profitable trade, not only in the commodities mentioned by Benjamin (gold and precious stones) but also in the goods brought to Zawila from Alwa: hides, wheat, various kinds of fruits and legumes, and salt. By means of this trade, Alwa was in contact with the products of the Middle East (as reflected in the glass found at Soba), southern Arabia (as attested by the imported Yemenite glazed ware found at Abu Geili), India (the agate beads discussed in Chapter 2, p. 52), and China (as indicated by the Chinese celadon [Abu Geili, noted in Chapter 2, p. 65] and the Chinese pottery found at Soba [Shinnie, pers. comm.]). Alwa also had some, although probably limited, access to the products of the kingdoms of the western Sudan and North Africa.

Salt has always been an important commodity in trans-Saharan commerce. However, one may well ask why bulky or perishable goods, like cereals and fruit, were involved in trade, especially inasmuch as Zawila has been described as a fertile oasis. Part of the answer lies in the fact that the main grain crops of the oases were millet or sorghum. The Arab rulers, it may be hypothesized, brought their Middle Eastern preference for wheat as the staff of life with them. Indeed, even in the nineteenth century A.D., Barth found that throughout the central Sudan, wheat was considered the prize dish of Arab princes (Barth, 1857:II, 57).

Alwa also had trade contact with the north, i.e., Dongola and Egypt. Evidence of trade activity with the kingdom of Dongola is provided by

Dongolan ware ceramics. Since the Alwan kings remained central figures in religious as well as secular matters, they must have maintained relations with the Egyptian churches. However, the nature of this relationship remains unclear. The discovery of imported Fayum glazed ware suggests commercial contact between Alwa and Fatimid Egypt. The peculiarly cordial relationship which seems to have existed after A.D. 1250 between the Alwan kings and the Mamluk sultans of Egypt can only have been motivated by strong commercial interests, most probably in slaves (Adams, 1977:471).

If there are good reasons for believing that the wealth of Alwa was based upon the export of raw materials, there are even stronger reasons for believing that trade was largely, if not exclusively, a state enterprise. This was certainly the case with the Meroitic empire and the Fung sultanate and, indeed, most other African trading kingdoms. Our present state of knowledge of Sudanese societies makes it difficult to imagine any private entrepreneur having the resources to engage in ivory-hunting or slave-raiding on any considerable scale. While the evidence is far from adequate, it can be inferred, on the basis of comparative evidence, that the king of Alwa exercised considerable control over the economic life of the country. As was the case during the Fung sultanate, it is reasonable to assume that central to the king's economic role was his monopoly over gold mining. However, an understanding of the political economy of the kingdom of Alwa requires a good deal more than knowledge of its material foundation. Even more importantly, it requires a sense of how, by whom, and especially for whom production and distribution were organized. It is precisely in this area that our information is most deficient.

B. The People of Alwa

It is clear from the descriptive evidence of Arab writers that Alwa was a polyethnic state. Assuming a broad pattern of continuity of adaptation to ecological conditions, and with our knowledge of the area subject to Alwa's domination, it is possible to infer the principal subsistence regimes of the mediaeval period. A survey of present populations will shed some light on the distribution of those of the past.

1. The Nile Nubians

These were the settled farming communities of the Nile valley from Abu Hamed in the north (including the Butana region) to a not-yet-definable point south of the confluence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile. This area has been referred to in this book as southern Nubia. The members of this group spoke Nubian languages, as noted from the historical and

archaeological record alluded to earlier. This is also attested by the presence of numerous Nubian place names throughout southern Nubia. Due to the fragmentary nature of the archaeological evidence bearing upon the Nubian languages of mediaeval Alwa, their relations to other Nubian languages have not been established. Griffith, who was the first to study the Nubian languages spoken in mediaeval Alwa, suggested that they may represent different dialects from those of the northern part of the Sudan (Griffith, 1913).

2. The Hill Nubians

The homeland of the people today called the Hill Nubians seems to correspond to the region called al-Ahdin by Ibn Hawqal. These are the inhabitants of Jebel Haraza in northern Kordofan, and the northern Nuba mountains (i.e., J. Kaderu and Dilling) in southeastern Kordofan (see Map VIII). In addition, the region includes other groups, such as the Tagali and Talodi among many others, who speak languages which some consider a completely independent stock, the Kordofanian. The economy of the region probably rested, as it does today, upon hoe cultivation of millet and sorghum. Ibn Hawqal specifically stated that these people possessed numerous cattle, horses and camels, and that gold and iron mining and trade existed.

3. The Beja

The Beja tribes of Beni-Amer and Hadendawa are at present nomadic pastoralists herding camels and cattle, living in the Sudanese border areas (i.e., the Baraka basin and the Atbara River area), while others live in Eritrea. They speak the northern Cushitic language, Tu Bedawiet.

4. Eastern Sudanic Peoples

This group which Spaulding referred to as "Prenilote" (the Hamag or the Anag of the Fung era), includes the Berta, Koma, Gumuz, and Mao (see Map III). They occupy the upper reaches of the Blue Nile valley together with the adjacent slopes of the Ethiopian plateau to the east. They depend primarily upon horticulture for their subsistence. In addition to sorghum, the universal staple, they grow millet, okra, and sesame. Animal husbandry of cattle, goats, and sheep, provides an auxiliary source of livelihood. Above all, the region is famous for its gold mining activity.

5. The Arabs

At present, the main Arab people of the area are the Shukria of the Juhayna group. In late Alwan times, they were mainly nomadic pastoralists herding camels and cattle in the district of Kassala and the eastern Butana (Ibn Hawqal, in Mus'ad, 1972).

6. The Alwan Mosaic

Given the complex differentiation of the Alwan peoples, as suggested above, what kind of unity can be ascribed to them? What sense does it make to speak of the historical phenomenon of Alwa as a unified whole? Is there sufficient evidence to justify treating all of the Alwan people as a single entity? The argument for the unity of Alwan society rests on two pervasive patterns: (*a*) a continuous and distinctive process of interaction, based on economic complementarity, of peoples with different adaptations; and (*b*) the existence of pan-Nubian cultural traits throughout Alwan society.

The ethnic groups of Alwa did not entirely live as discrete isolated units. For at least a thousand years the people of Alwa seem to have been in more or less constant interaction, through trade, religious activities, migration, intermarriage (as evidenced by the present population of the Sudan), and the exchange of services.

The different people of Alwa had been brought into direct contact through local and regional markets and indirectly through caravan routes. The larger portion of commerce undoubtedly consisted of the exchange of mundane commodities. The contemporary barter of grain for meat, between sedentary and nomadic peoples, serves as an example of this basic level of exchange. Trade of this nature would by itself have created no compelling demand for a more powerful government, although the mutual interdependencies which it created among the people of Alwa would have tended to knit the area together into an economic whole. This, in turn, would have contributed greatly to the social, economic, and political stability of the kingdom of Alwa, and to the cultural continuity to which the broad pattern of the history of the Sudan attests.

Given the diversified resources available in each ecological niche in Alwa, it is unlikely that any ethnic group could remain economically isolated. It is reasonable to assume that all parts of the kingdom had developed local markets, as was the case during the Fung period, as well as at the present day. Today, these markets are usually attended by members of two or more ethnic groups and often by traders from distant places. In addition to satisfying local consumption needs, the products brought to local markets are taken by traders to large regional centres. At

these regional markets, people, as well as goods, come from more diverse backgrounds and longer distances. One example of such local trade is that which links Soba—the main source of salt—with the southern part of the kingdom, i.e., Fazughli, where salt was traditionally exchanged for gold and slaves. This pattern of trade which is known as *jallaba* ("petty merchant trade") goes back at least to the sixth century A.D. and continued to the nineteenth century A.D. In the later history of Alwa, Muslim traders played a critical role in linking it with the diverse regions of the northern Sudan. In particular, the opening of the eastern desert route and the Red Sea ports, together with the collapse of Axum (the main rival of Alwa) must have enabled the Muslims to carry their goods and, in the process, their ideas and values from one region to another.

Christianity likely established other kinds of ties. These ties probably came about peacefully, through channels opened up by monks, refugees and traders, and by the need for diplomatic alliance. The distribution of known archaeological sites from Abu Hamed in the north to as far south as the Sennar district, and from the Butana in the east perhaps even as far as Ain Farah in Darfur, bears witness to the far-reaching activities of the Christian monks. Thus, the effect of Christian missionary activities was to criss-cross Alwa with lines of intertribal alliance and to bring most of the isolated peoples into a comprehensive network of exchange, both of material and ideological goods.

The character of Alwa's Christianity was probably analogous to what is known at present as popular Islam, that is the adoption of its central beliefs and symbols, but incorporating them in such a way that the resulting belief systems strongly reflects indigenous traditions. The Christian God was probably adopted in a manner that permitted simultaneous belief in the *zar* spirits, the evil eye, and the like, which are neither Christian nor Islamic in a strict theological sense.

This Nubianization of the Christian religion was noted by earlier observers (e.g., Mus'ad, 1960); it has usually been interpreted as evidence of the superficiality with which the Nubians assimilated Christianity; however, it can also be suggested this Nubianization of Christianity be seen as an effort by which the Nubian people could maintain their traditional cultural orientations relatively intact by absorbing and transfiguring only as much of the Christian religion as would fit in with their existing system of meaning, as is the case with present-day Islam.

This listing of what is referred to in this book as pan-Nubian cultural traits is by no means intended to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative. The point is not to establish exclusively Alwan or Nubian characteristics. What this book has tried to show is that the image of Alwa as an outpost of mediaeval Nubia, surrounded by a hinterland of loosely connected ethnic groups, ought to be replaced by a picture which acknowledges that the people of Alwa have long shared many features of a deeply rooted

cultural complex. Furthermore, the Alwans were very likely organized into units of economic co-operation that were, in turn, bound together in extensive networks of interdependency, of the sort clearly seen in the present-day social organization of the area.

To share similar orientations and traditions and to be part of a complex relational network is not, however, necessarily to belong to a single organized society. Even today, one can scarcely speak of the diverse people of the Sudan as composing a single unified national society. They remain organized in relatively discrete, partially autonomous, local social systems, locally articulated under the umbrella of the Republic of Sudan. One can see the origin of this pattern of articulation as early as the mediaeval kingdom of Alwa, which may well have set the stage for the modern northern Sudanese mosaic of ethnic and economic subgroups.

In summary, rather than viewing Alwa as an arbitrary state composed of numerous isolated and vastly diverse subject peoples, it can also be seen as an extensive network of interdependency which the Alwan rulers were able to mobilize into a state-level society.

C. State and Society in Alwa

There exists in the literature two contrasting views of the character and scale of Alwan monarchy and state. On the one hand, we have Adams' depiction of Alwa as a primitive frontier state:

> In the south, the Kingdom of Alwa has been accorded an importance by both mediaeval and modern scholars which is hardly attested by its archaeological remains. . . . Obviously Alwa was one of those semi-mythical kingdoms which by their very remoteness and insubstantiality have fired men's imaginations throughout the ages, it is one of half a dozen regions both in Africa and in Asia associated with legendary Prester John. In reality, Alwa must have been a poor and primitive frontier state, no more comparable with Makouria or Nobatia in power and influence than Ireland is with England. (Adams, 1965:170-175)

On the other hand, we have the statements of the Arab geographers. Al-Yagubi, who was the first known Arab writer to visit Alwa during the ninth century A.D., said "the second Kingdom of the Nuba which is called Nuba was more powerful than Muqurra . . . and they have a large country about three months' journey" (al-Yagubi, in Mus'ad, 1972). The next source of information is Ibn Hawqal, who visited Alwa in A.D. 943. He maintained that "one of their most prosperous places is the region of Alwa, where one finds an uninterrupted chain of villages and towns" (Ibn Hawqal, in Mus'ad, 1972). Al-Aswani, who visited both the kingdoms of Alwa and Dongola in the tenth century A.D., said "the King of

Alwa is more powerful than the King of Al-Muqurra, and has a large army. His country is more extensive and fertile . . . they have excellent horses" (al-Aswani, in Mus'ad, 1972). The latest known source of information about the kingdom of Alwa during the thirteenth century A.D. is Abu Salih al-Armani, who described the town of Soba as follows: "Town of Alwa: Here there are troops and a large kingdom with wide districts" (Abu Salih, in Mus'ad, 1972).

One problem in sorting out these statements is that they are phrased in relative terms. It is not always clear what particular authors have in mind when they characterize Alwa as "large" or "poor," "prosperous" or "primitive." However, there are good reasons for crediting the view of the Arab authors over Adams. First, they were eyewitnesses to living cultures, whereas Adams' view was based on speculative reconstruction from remains. Adams' view is consistent with the focus of his research in Lower Nubia; from such a perspective Alwa necessarily appears peripheral. Second, all of the Arab authors had visited not only the Nubian kingdoms (and hence had a comparative frame of reference), but knew the great centres of power of the day, such as Cairo and Baghdad. Therefore, their characterizations of Alwa cannot be dismissed lightly.

The picture of mediaeval Alwa which emerges from the archaeological and ethnographic record is, in fact, not inconsistent with one of a long period of stability and prosperity, which has striking parallels with the Meroitic period. Unlike many of the ancient kingdoms, Alwa, so far as we know, appears to have escaped the upheavals associated with violent dynastic changes. In this sense, it would appear that Alwa was more than a geographical and legal unity: it must have had a central authority capable of translating the imperatives of defence and control into a coherent symbolic form (i.e., with mythic characterizations, symbols, and theories of legitimacy). There must have been a focus of administration, an agency through which its policies were given specific character and translated into action. The concern here is with a few features of government, politics, and the administrative system.

The political system, which involves both processual and historical dimensions, is only one aspect of the organizational structure. It cuts across the boundaries of other institutional spheres; that is to say, the polity is dependent on other institutional systems for the continuous input of resources, services, and support needed for implementation of its collective goals, for the maintenance of its place within the society, and for the fulfilment of its regulative and integrative functions. From the economic sphere, the polity must receive various material resources and manpower. It depends on the cultural institutions for basic support as well as identification with its symbols and the legitimation of the rulers. However, the interaction between the polity and other institutional systems of the society is not limited to these mutual influences alone.

These are articulated through the demands which political institutions make on different groups in the society and through the transmission of political decisions from the rulers to the ruled. This continuous interaction between the polity and other institutional spheres constitutes the dynamics of the political processes in any society. From this, we may be able to hypothesize that the rulers of Alwa were able to command material (economic) and ideological support for the state organization from the common producers which, in turn, enhanced the formation and survival of the kingdom of Alwa over the course of its long and stable history.

1. State Formation

Underlying the conceptualization of state formation for the kingdom of Alwa are the factors which have previously been discussed: ecological diversity and economic interdependencies; in short, the mosaic pattern of the northern and central Sudan that appears to have substantial temporal depth. This area can be seen as a natural seedbed of primitive state formation. Against this general background, a broad continuity in large-scale political formations from Meroe through Alwa to Fung can be hypothesized.

Following from the above, it is likely that the coalescence of the kingdom of Alwa into an independent socio-political organization, with a bounded territory and a central government, was a gradual development. It is impossible to pinpoint the precise moment of the birth of the kingdom of Alwa. Indeed, the very notion of multivariate causality of social phenomena precludes the belief in such a discrete event. Some factors which need to be considered concerning the origin of the Alwan state are summarized briefly below.

a. Historically, the decline of Meroitic central power seems to have triggered numerous developments. As suggested in the discussion of the Tangasi culture, by the time of the collapse of Meroitic power and the arrival on the scene of the Noba, the diverse people of the Late Meroitic, or pre-Alwan, period might well have been woven into a loose intersocietal system which stopped somewhat short of constituting a large-scale state. Whether or not this is so depends on the interpretation of the burial mounds discussed in Chapter 2 and whether they can be seen as evidence of local nobilities who, at the very least, shared some symbols (e.g., in burial customs). By the rise of the Christian monarchy at Soba, some two centuries later, many of these people may have become integrated into a single political system through the effort of the Alwans. The establishment of a central authority would have provided a certain

amount of social cement to connect the many people brought under its jurisdiction.

b. Certain organizational features of the defunct Meroitic state may well have been preserved on a small scale within the political structures of the presumably autonomous social units of the Tangasi period. It is also possible that the former glory of the Meroitic state and details of its organization were preserved in oral tradition throughout the Tangasi period. The Alwans can be seen as Meroiticized Nubians, as is suggested by the description of the Noba in the Ezana inscription. This point is further demonstrated in the socio-religious basis of the kingdom of Alwa, exemplified in the royal regalia of the Alwan kings, which exhibited other Christian and pan-Nubian character. The cross on the crown, and the vestment with a double-headed eagle, reveal a strong Byzantine influence; the two horns of the crown seem to be a heritage from the past. The latter feature has been linked with the snakes which Meroitic kings put on their crowns (Osman, 1973:83). Another possible survival of this tradition is the cotton cap with two horns stuffed with straw which was worn at Rashad, in the Nuba Mountains, as a symbol of kingship in the early twentieth century A.D. (Crowfoot, 1927:43). In fact, a horned crown, *taqia um gernein*, has been worn by a number of kings in various parts of the Sudan during the period of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries A.D. (MacMichael, 1922:249 and Crawford, 1951:325). It was the most famous of the insignia of the Fung sultanate.

c. The struggle, or the threat, of war (as evident from Ezana inscriptions) may have, in turn, stimulated the emergence of stronger leaders, a more complex military organization, and possibly a standing army. This would have created a permanent need for regular supplies of food and other commodities for the maintenance of the armed forces, the remuneration of warriors, and the establishment of communications by means of roads, boats, messengers, etc. This is not to say that the formation of the kingdom of Alwa was necessarily by conquest. In view of the remarkable continuity displayed in Nubian cultural history, it seems unlikely that the objective of the Alwan rulers was simply to govern the kingdom as a military caste. The need for protection in an era of social upheaval is obvious, and in such circumstances it was better to be a member of the state than not; in Service's words, "the benefits of being part of the society obviously outweighed the alternatives" (Service, 1975:299).

d. The complementarity of subsistence systems of the central and northern Sudan, and of the Nile and its hinterland, also fostered the prosperity of the state once it had gone beyond the threshold of organizational unity.

e. The establishment, or re-establishment, of the eastern desert trade route opened a new chapter in the history of Alwa and must have had far-reaching consequences for the political and economic development of

Alwa. The external impetus of trade seems to have been a crucial factor in the expansion of the state beyond its original tribal homeland, a factor stimulating territorial organization on a larger scale. The territorial organization of different geographical regions would have encouraged the development of long-distance trade in agricultural and other products. These factors would have, in turn, contributed to the growing power of the monarch through the accumulation of wealth, association with foreign merchants and, judging by analogy to other African states, a near monopolistic control over strategic commodities such as gold. The diversity of primary products stimulated local trade and also broadened the economic basis of the kingdom.

f. From the standpoint of political and economic histories, the importance of the area, formerly the heartland of Alwa, must be examined with an ecological perspective in mind. It is apparent from the Ezana inscription that the Noba were not merely a group of raiders on Axum's northwestern borderlands, as is sometimes held. They were primarily a settled people growing millet and cultivating cotton; indeed the earliest known literary reference to cotton in the Nile valley is in the Ezana inscription. The Noba also owned large herds of cattle and flocks of sheep. The existence of a large number of these animals in the area is well attested from the descriptions of mediaeval Arab writers.

The vernacular architecture of Alwa, called "towns of straw," which was, and still is, characteristic of the region, should not be mistaken for a sign of a lower grade of culture. House types in the Sudan are an index of local ecological factors, and not of political complexity.

The wealth of the area seems to have been one of the reasons behind the Axumite invasion in the middle of the fourth century A.D. Here were located the extensive fertile lands (the Gezira and the Butana); here were located the rich and ancient cities of which Soba may possibly have been one; and here passed the trade routes to the east, west, north and south. Given the characteristic geographical features of the region, it is reasonable to assume that one of the external forces behind the rise of Alwa was its threat to Axum's influence over the frontier people and the trade with the east and southwest. By the seventh century A.D., the Arab conquests had weakened Axum by cutting off its trade links with Arabia, Egypt and the Greco-Byzantine world (Levine, 1974:70). Consequently, Alwa, having maintained good relations with the Muslim traders, became an important trading kingdom in the Upper Nile valley, indeed in northeastern Africa as a whole. The existence of Muslim traders and settlers in the eastern district of Alwa is referred to in Ibn Hawqal's account of the kingdom of Alwa. In fact, according to al-Aswani, a suburb for the Muslim traders seems to have been established at Soba.

2. Territorial Organization and Royal Administration

Investigation of the territorial organization and royal administration of the Alwan state presupposes a knowledge of the governmental structure of Soba. Regrettably, there is little firm knowledge of this aspect of the kingdom except from the hints that can be gleaned from the Arab writers. Ideally, a dynamic model is needed that could account for the contractions and expansions that all traditional states undergo through time. In the present state of knowledge, the most that can be offered is a generalized and static sketch of the main features of an administrative organization. Of necessity, this picture relies heavily on analogies with other African states of similar scale.

As is apparent from the description of the Arab writers, the state of Alwa was characterized by a centralization of authority within the ruling group which had its headquarters at Soba. According to al-Aswani, the temporal power of the king was absolute. The king's position as head of state, and the sociopolitical repercussions of this, seems to have been accepted by at least a majority of the subjects of the state. It is the nature of traditional kings to maintain order, centralize control, and aggrandize their territory. It can therefore be argued that the Alwan kings acted to establish a more or less centralized, unified polity in which they could monopolize the political decision-making. In doing so, the rulers had to create bureaucratic positions, either by placing their own personal dependents into offices or by co-opting existing authorities of the subject regions. In order to utilize these potential allies to mobilize necessary resources and to implement their policies, the rulers had to forge reliable instruments of political and administrative action that could be used to provide various services to the body of the system.

In this connection, the administrative apparatus needed to make the state run smoothly was, necessarily, a complex one. Numerous needs had to be met including the formulation of laws and regulations, the maintenance of the existing social order, the financing of the state and its protection vis-à-vis external threats. In order to satisfy all these requirements, delegation of tasks and powers was necessary. This is a basic and essential feature for the survival of any state, past or present.

It seems, from the descriptive evidence provided by the mediaeval Arab geographers, that the king of Alwa had delegated officials to act on his behalf as governors of the provinces, or districts, of Alwa. In Ibn Hawqal's description, a glimpse of the territorial organization of the kingdom of Alwa can be discerned. The territory of Alwa extended from Abu Hamed in the north to as far south as Fazughli, and from the frontier of Ethiopia in the east, perhaps as far as Darfur in the west. In addition to the territory over which the king of Alwa claimed dominion, it is likely that Alwan influence extended into adjacent areas.

Concerning Alwa's internal organization, Ibn Hawqal's account confirmed that the kingdom of Alwa was divided into a number of regions, such as Taflien and Bazin in the east, Mernakah and Kersa in the south, and al-Ahdin in the west (Map IX). He stated that the Taflien region (which corresponds to the present district of al-Takah, i.e., Kassala in the Gash basin) was governed by an Arabic-speaking ruler appointed by the king of Alwa (Vantini, 1975:164). That this district was occupied by Arab tribes was also noted by Abd al-Jalil (1955:3). Ibn Hawqal also related that in al-Ahdin (the Nuba Hills region) there were Christian peoples obedient to (vassals of) the king of Alwa. This could be taken to mean that al-Ahdin was one of the peripheral units of the kingdom of Alwa, and that its inhabitants recognized the central government of Soba in terms of a tributary relationship. The sites of Abu Sufyan and Zankor, in Kordofan, may relate to the period of Ibn Hawqal's account.

It is interesting to note that al-Jeblien (in Northern Darfur) was subject to the kingdom of Dongola, according to Ibn Hawqal. Such archaeological evidence as we have from mediaeval sites in Ain Farah seems to show a closer affinity to Soba (or Alwa). This apparent paradox might be explained by postulating that peripheral areas could easily switch allegiance between the two Nile valley kingdoms. While Dongola seems to have been basically a riverine, agricultural, linear state that had a firmly based Nubian ethnic identity, Alwa (as evidenced from the descriptions of Arab writers) was a polyethnic state, comprising both savanna and riverine environments. Furthermore, while the kingdom of Dongola seems to have been more or less oriented toward the north, the orientation of Alwa seems to have been based on an east-west axis. The influence of Alwa in the western part of the Sudan may be attributed to the geographically favoured trade patterns; Kordofan (as mentioned by Ibn Hawqal) was famous for its gold trade. In the period subsequent to Ibn Hawqal's description, the contacts between Alwa, on the one hand, and Darfur and Kordofan, on the other, are attested by Benjamin of Tudela (Vantini, 1975: 290-292) in the twelfth century A.D.

The argument that the influence of Alwa had reached the far western part of the Sudan, Darfur, seems to be strengthened by O'Fahey's claims that "the slow decline of the Christian Nubian states—in particular of Alwa, at once a savanna and a riverine state—provided the long-term impetus for the emergence of Sennar, as a successor state to Alwa, and of Wadai and Darfur" (O'Fahey, 1980:145). In other words, over a period of half a millennium, east-west trade through the central Sudan has been a crucial factor in the formation of powerful states. However, until more data are collected, it would be premature to attempt to describe too confidently the complex of relationships involving Alwa and the western part of the Sudan.

Further information bearing upon the territorial divisions of the kingdom of Alwa is provided by Ibn Abd al-Zahir (d. 1292):

> On the 20th of Zul Q'ada 685 [A.D. 1286] prince Alim-Al-Din Singer sent a messenger to the Nubian king [*malik*] [and] to Udur the ruler [*sahib*] of Al-Abwab, and to the rulers [*ashab*] Barah, Al-Takah or Taka, Kedru, Danfou, Ari, Befal, Al-Anag and Kersa. (Ibn Abd al-Zahir, in Mus'ad, 1972:197)

This statement seems to correspond more or less with Ibn Hawqal's regional divisions of the kingdom of Alwa.

The identification of al-Takah and al-Abwab is clear (see above). Kedru has been identified with the modern village of Kadero (see Map IV), which lies 17.7 km north of Khartoum (MacMichael, 1922:183, and Arkell, 1961:198). Crawford (1951:25) thought that Kedru might be the old name of al-Metemma, for the site is known to have been of commercial and political importance during the Fung era. In this connection, it will be noted that al-Metemma lies near the Hobagi mound-graves mentioned earlier (see Chapter 2, p. 37, and Map V).

It is tempting to identify modern Ari with the region of Bazin, mentioned by Ibn Hawqal. Ari, which today includes a number of tribes, such as the Kunama and Barya, is located in western Eritrea. These tribes believe in a supreme god called Anneh (Ullendorff, 1973:107). It is interesting to note that the Bazin tribes were described, by Ibn Hawqal, as professing a religion, and believing in one god whom they called Anneh.

Al-Anag is identified in this work with the Roseires-Fazughli area in southern Gezira. It was one of the important districts of Alwa where, until recently, gold was obtained in nuggets. There are a number of reported sites of possible Alwan affinity in the Roseires district. Chataway, who reported these sites, pointed out that in this district, Soba is said to be fairly common as a place name. There is a Soba at Mazmum and there are also two sites known as Soba near Roseires, where Anag pottery and beads can be found. They are reputed to be Anag village sites (Chataway, 1930:248). Chataway also added that an oath which the Anag use and dare not break runs as follows: "I swear by Soba the home of my grandfathers and grandmothers which can make the stone float and the cotton ball sink." Chataway stated that some trace, albeit faint, of Christian beliefs can be found among the Anag of the Roseires district. There is a "christening" ceremony at which the child has a cross marked on its forehead with charcoal. A youth, if he becomes breathless when playing, will mark his chest with a cross. A sick person will wear a coin which has a head and a cross on it. These and similar customs are not confined to the Roseires district but are known throughout the Gezira region and in the northern and western Sudan as well.

The Kersa are described by Ibn Hawqal and al-Aswani as a Nubian tribe living in the Gezira region. The relationship of Kersa to contemporary ethnic groups is unknown, but it is tempting to identify them with the archaeological sites in the Sennar district, i.e., Abu Geili and Saqadi. The other places referred to by Ibn Abd el Zahir cannot be identified even provisionally.

It is evident that the kingdom of Alwa was divided into a number of provinces, or principalities (as had been the case in the kingdom of Dongola, the Fung and Darfur sultanates) under the umbrella of Soba. Given the diversity of the geographical zones of Alwa, its economic setup, and its ethnic composition, the division of Alwa into administrative districts must have been inevitable. The simplest way of delegating authority within such a regime would be to carve it up into a number of geographical-ethnic areas, each with an officer responsible to the king for law and order and for organizing whatever services and payments were required. This organization also solved the perennial problem of satisfying (or neutralizing) the ambitions of junior or collateral members of royal lineages. In Alwa, sons of kings, who in a matrilineal society would have had no direct claim to kingship, may have been appointed to bureaucratic positions or to governorships of some province. It seems reasonable to conclude that the kingdom of Alwa was perpetually threatened with decentralization.

Soba, as the political and religious capital and as the centre of the royal court, must surely have been the pre-eminent town in the Alwan state. If this is true, there would have been a need for officials, agents, and advisors concerned with its organization. Scant evidence for the administrative organization can be extracted from al-Aswani's description which stated ". . . and the provisions of the country of Alwa and their King came from this region [the Kersa], they send the boats and these came back loaded" (al-Aswani, in Mus'ad, 1972:114). This citation may suggest the existence of royal officials connected with tax, or tribute, collection or with trade activity. As commercial interests grew with the prosperity of the state, the maintenance of secure trade routes was mutually beneficial to both. In view of the importance of this area as the "Granary of the Sudan," it seems likely that grain surpluses were produced and formed a major element of tribute. In this case, the existence of office-holder(s) concerned with government granaries seems quite likely. In the kingdom of Dongola, such an office is known to have existed (Osman, 1978).

Given the vast territory of the kingdom and its hostile relationship with both the kingdom of Dongola in the north and Axum in the east, it is reasonable to infer the presence of a standing army. The use of iron tools, from the time of the Meroitic empire, must inevitably have influenced not only the further development of agriculture and trade, but also

the military sciences. Of his tenth century A.D. visit to Alwa, al-Aswani stated that, "the king of Alwa is more powerful than the king of Ab[illegible] had a larger army [illegible] excellent horses and [illegible] camels" (al-Aswani, [illegible]). Abu Salih made the same estimate of the kingdom when he wrote "Town of Alwa: Here there are troops and a large kingdom [town] with wide districts" (Abu Salih, in Mus'ad, 1972). The existence of a standing army seems to be one of the characteristic features of early states (Claessen and Skalnik, 1978).

3. *The Church Administration*

The relationship between the political and the religious orders in the kingdom of Alwa is not known. In fact, very little is understood regarding the nature of church administration and its relationship to royal administration. Christianity probably became incorporated within the state organization through the patronage and protection of the Alwan kings. They were already the centre of the state and the source of its stability, as well as the channels through which its contacts with the outside world were made. It is significant to note that Christian missionaries who came to Alwa in A.D. 580 turned first to the ruling families, placing the fate of their faith in the hands of the Alwan kings. The church's well-being was connected with the prosperity of the king. The bishoprics of Alwa, according to Crawford (1951:26), were Bora, Gagara, Martin, Arodias, Banazi, and Menkesa. Unfortunately, none of these places can be identified.

It must be stressed that this presentation of the organizational structure of the kingdom of Alwa is largely speculative. A more comprehensive and detailed picture of the political and cultural history of Alwa will only emerge after further investigation of relevant archaeological sites. In particular, further excavations at Soba might be expected to reveal much of value for the reconstruction of the sociopolitical basis of the kingdom of Alwa.

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4 / *Towards a Better Understanding of the Kingdom of Alwa*

ALWA HAS YET TO take its place in the archaeology of the Sudan as the foremost civilization of the period from the sixth to the sixteenth centuries A.D. The concentration of archaeological work in the northern Sudan has resulted in limited resources for survey and excavation in the area formerly the domain of the kingdom of Alwa. However, a survey of the available literature, dating from the middle of the fourth century A.D. to the present, reveals the importance of this kingdom and emphasizes the need for more comprehensive archaeological work.

Working from the evidence, both literary and archaeological, this work has tried to provide a baseline for the study of the cultural history of the kingdom of Alwa. This survey, which has not previously been undertaken for this kingdom, sets the stage for more complete archaeological work, but emphasizes the usefulness of a variety of approaches which may provide a better understanding of the development and fluorescence of Alwa.

Each of the earlier chapters of this work presented a set of data on the kingdom. The written sources pertaining to the kingdom of Alwa, presented in Chapter 1, lead into the discussion of archaeological sites identified in the region. It is evident that the scope and importance of the kingdom warrants further serious archaeological investigation. The summary of the social organization and economy of the kingdom, as extrapolated primarily from analogy with the present-day Sudan, as well as by comparison with other contemporary kingdoms, provided a basis for the development of hypotheses for future archaeological work. Alwa's strategically important location in the Sudanese heartland and its long existence suggests that this kingdom may have played an important, albeit unrecognized, role in the history of mediaeval Nubia in particular, and of the Sudan in general. In the analysis of the material presented in this work, it has been suggested that some aspects of the kingdom, such as ethnic composition and economic patterns, are believed to have been formative in respect to subsequent periods. However, fundamental to this analysis and important in further research on this period is the notion of the interrelationship of the past with the present in the Sudan and the resulting need for an interdisciplinary research design and a broader research perspective in all future archaeological work in the area.

Suggestions for Further Research

Apart from the material reviewed in this work, no general synthesis of the cultural history of the Alwan kingdom has yet appeared. Most treatments to date have been concerned with special topics, such as art history, but no attempt has been made to survey Alwan culture as a whole. To date, archaeologists have paid comparatively little attention to the settlement patterns, modes of production, and the functional interrelationship of institutions in Alwa. This has resulted from both a lack of systematic fieldwork and the limited range of evidence considered to be relevant in earlier interpretations of Sudanese cultural history. A preoccupation of earlier investigators with the history of Sudanese Nubia has led to a very narrow interpretation of the data, with little sensitivity to the specific cultural elements which characterize each period. As illustrated in this study, detailed empirical evidence about even some of the most fundamental aspects of Alwan civilization is scarce. Gaps in the data are filled by the use of analogy with the modern Sudan and, while some analogies in such areas as ecology are fairly secure, this renders much of the discussion speculative and problematic.

Further progress in the understanding of the cultural phenomenon of the kingdom of Alwa will benefit most from sustained empirical research in archaeology and cognate fields of inquiry. In archaeology, so extensive is the work yet to be done that, despite commendable progress over the past several years, particularly in the extreme north of the Sudan, many promising sites in the central Sudan remain untouched. Field surveys, with a very few exceptions, have not yet been undertaken in the area formerly the heartland of the Alwan civilization. Detailed surveys and topographical studies are needed, particularly in the eastern part of the Sudan, in the areas lying west of the Nile (i.e., Kordofan and Darfur), along the Blue Nile and White Nile, and along the frontier between Sudan and Ethiopia. The highest returns for research investment, in terms of addressing the most pressing set of problems, would be obtained from working in areas where there are different kinds of archaeological sites in a single area: town sites, Christian churches, villages, cemeteries, fortresses, castles, and, perhaps, royal palaces. Aerial photography could greatly facilitate the survey of main areas, particularly infrared photography, which distinguishes plant communities and soil characteristics useful in determining the size and configuration of sites. Of course, this is no substitute for ground surveys, where areas favourable to human occupation are either explored on foot or viewed from slow-moving vehicles. Where complete ground surveys are impractical, owing to the size of the sites, sampling procedures can assist in the calculation of the nature and density of an area's occupation. Collection of surface materials

may permit assessment of the time-period of occupation, external cultural relationships and trade, and functionally different areas within the site.

This examination of the present state of mediaeval Nubian studies has shown that, other than a secondary focus upon Soba, little else of the archaeology of the central Sudan is known beyond a few instances of surface finds and premature conclusions. This is regrettable, especially in light of the historical importance of this region as a transition zone between the grassland economies to the south and the large trade centres to the north along the Nile valley. The cultural and linguistic composition of the central Sudan is complex and the role of archaeology is critical in reconstructing population movements, cultural contacts, and the sequence of the numerous sites in the region.

Archaeology must not be seen as limited to monumental archaeology or salvage archaeology, both of which have been characteristic of previous investigations in the Sudan. What is needed is a combination of techniques which will provide a mass of new data concerning settlement patterns, trade relationships, and artifact assemblages. These data would enable archaeologists to determine the nature of the subsistence base and give an idea of population density, as well as throw light on political and social structures. The generation of such data depends on a close collaboration between archaeologists and other specialists. This approach would not only shed light on the sociocultural development of Alwa, but would also provide another dimension for understanding the cultural mechanisms exhibited in the mediaeval period.

We have seen that the Alwans had a complex cultural and social system. The humbler elements of this culture have persisted beneath a veneer of Islam to the present. Returning to the ancient material reveals the context of the pre- and post-Christian periods, and allows archaeologists to place them in a more meaningful interpretive framework. This not only allows for the exploration of the salient problems of the Alwan kingdom, but also provides a common set of assumptions and strategies which should yield a better understanding of the cultural adaptation of mediaeval Nubia.

The study of the oral traditions of this historically important region would also help to fill some of the lacunae in the archaeological data. It is now recognized that no systematic study of the cultural history of a region or a people is complete without the collection of oral history prior to or during archaeological work. Moreover, working within a time-period for which there are relevant written sources means that the historical archaeologist has access to observations of the period. The relative recency of archaeological material of the mediaeval period and its augmentation through the written record, compiled over several centuries, has the further advantage of making the descriptions and analyses of the ethnologist more immediately relevant to the archaeologist. This is not to deny the importance of such mainly synchronic studies to prehistoric archaeology,

but to point out the proportionately greater and more varied data resources available to the historical archaeologist, and the greater immediacy of common interests with other relevant fields of enquiry. Ethnography or ethnohistory with an archaeological slant can greatly increase the possibilities of interpretation of the remains that survive in the archaeological context, since it may be inferred that human reaction within similar cultural and ecological parameters is likely to have been the same or very similar in the past as in the present. Therefore, if the needs and the technological levels of the present-day population and the carrying capacity of its habitat are known, a means of comparison and a basis for estimating those of mediaeval times and also those of prehistoric populations of the same locale is provided.

We know that Alwa was composed of distinct ethnic groups, and the linguistic complexity of the region is well known. Three of the four largest language groups in Africa are represented in the area formerly the heartland of the kingdom of Alwa: Congo-Kordofanian, Nilo-Saharan, and Afro-Asiatic. This may be seen as a reflection of the antiquity of many people in the area, and of the more recent entry of Arabs. This ethnic diversity has made the Sudan outstandingly rich in folklore. A study of this folklore could contribute to a better understanding of the social realities and cultural innovations brought about through time. Ethnic relations can also be viewed through folklore. Much of the information gleaned in a study of folklore can be projected into the past.

A final research strategy for future work on the kingdom of Alwa is to be found in the historical, or human, geography of the central Sudan. One of the main problems encountered in the historiography of the kingdom of Alwa is the identification of some of the place names and people's names mentioned by the mediaeval Arab writers, such as Ibn Hawqal and Ibn Abd al Zahir. In the case of the former, his descriptions of the geographical features of the kingdom of Alwa are relatively clear, and the location of many place names has been possible. However, in general, only a careful reconstruction of Sudanese human geography through time, using the analysis of place names and assisted by archaeological exploration and oral history, will provide the reliable data which are needed.

In conclusion, it would be too easy to claim that the acquisition of data through the collaboration of archaeologists and specialists from related fields of research will provide firm answers to all the problems pertaining to the kingdom of Alwa. The argument presented here is simply that human behaviour is too complex to be understood except by an integration of the known disciplines. Making the best of the investigations requires, at the very least, consideration of all of the evidence and the balancing of probabilities. Although this is a job which will never be finished, the interdisciplinary approach offers the greatest promise for opening new doors into the past.

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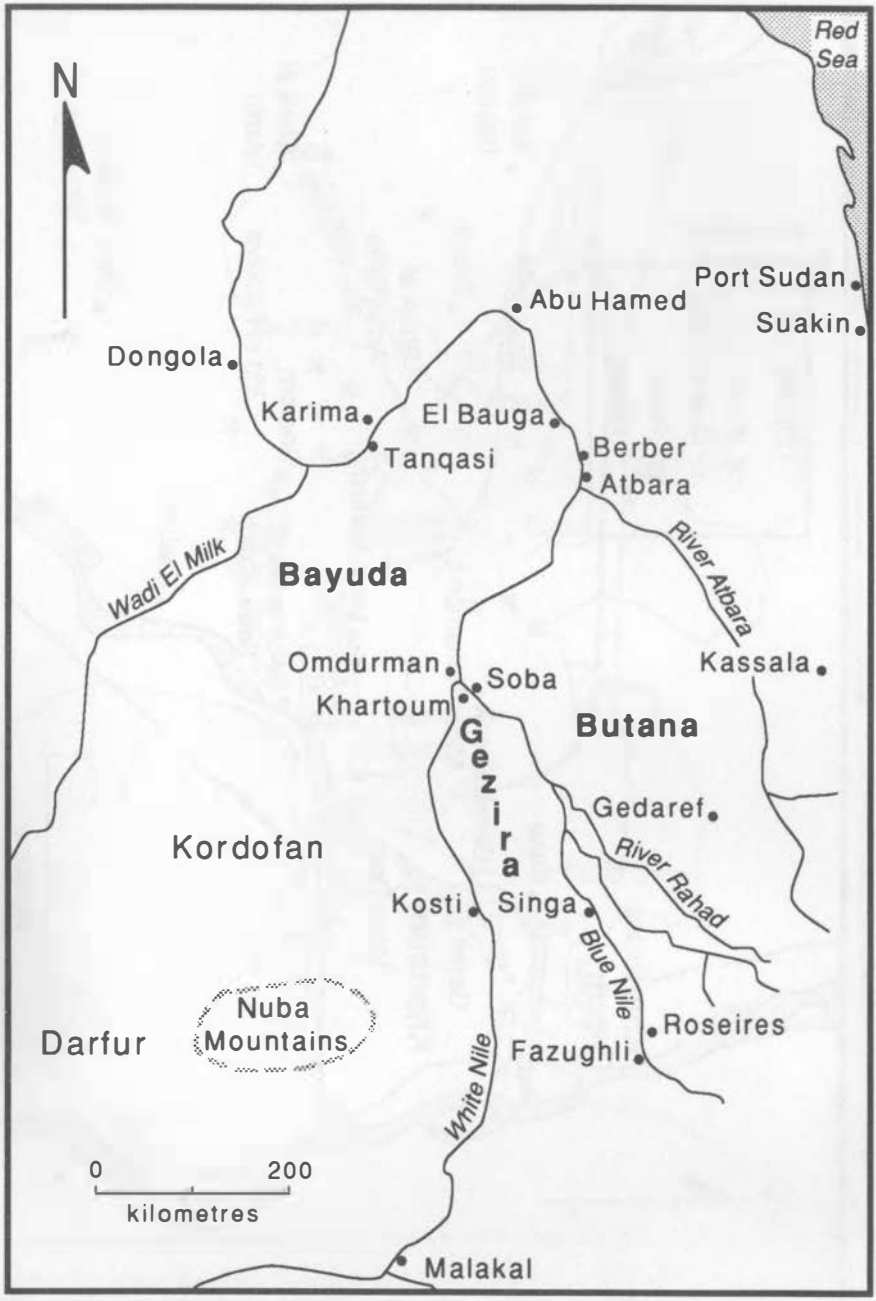
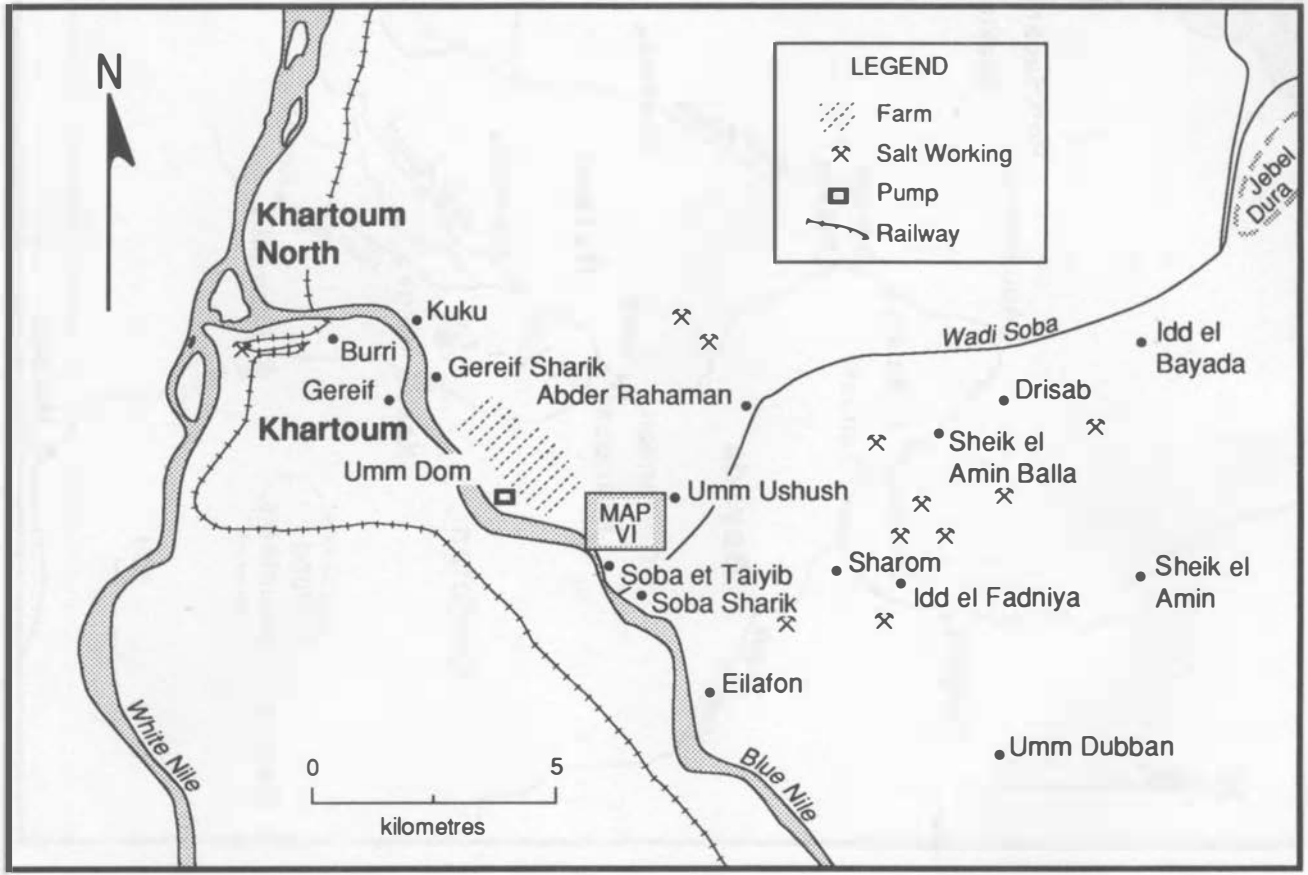
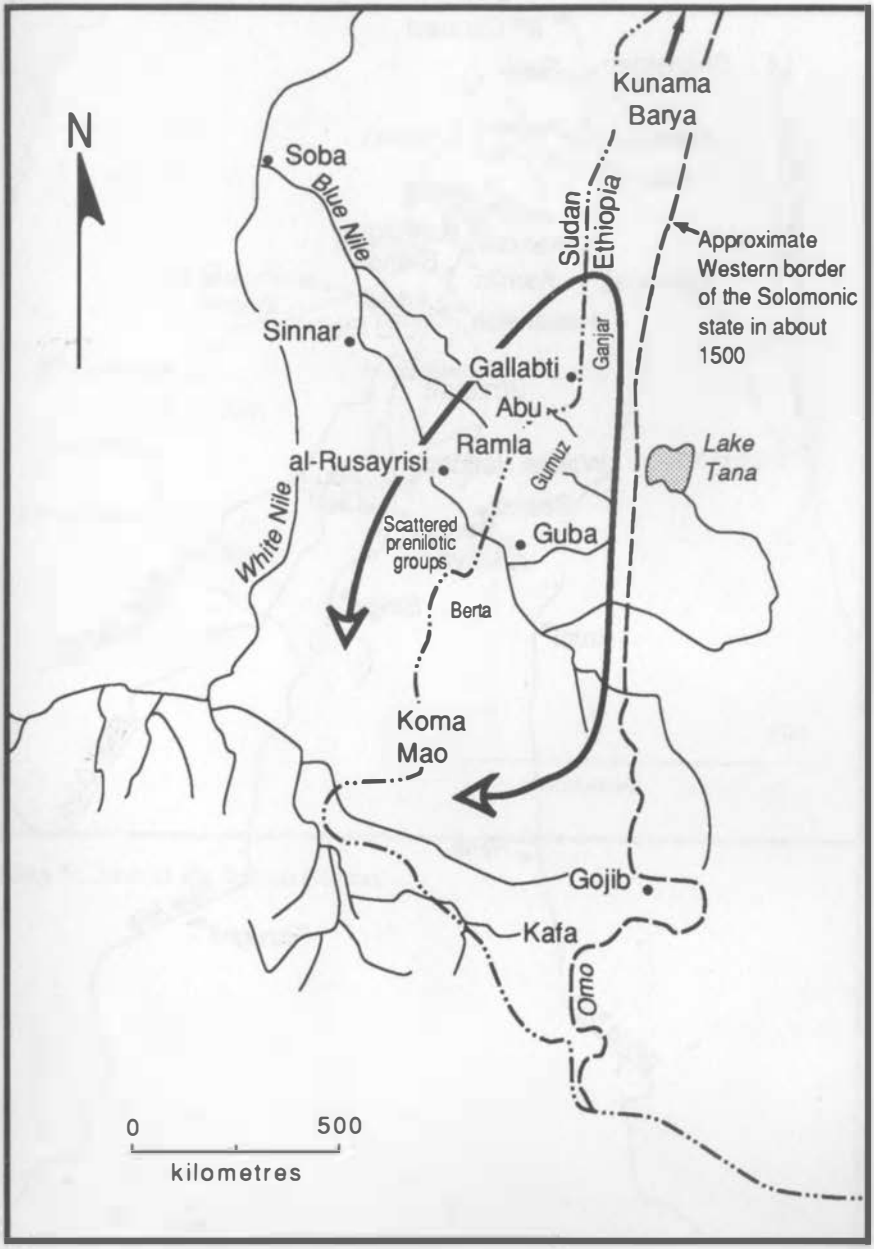


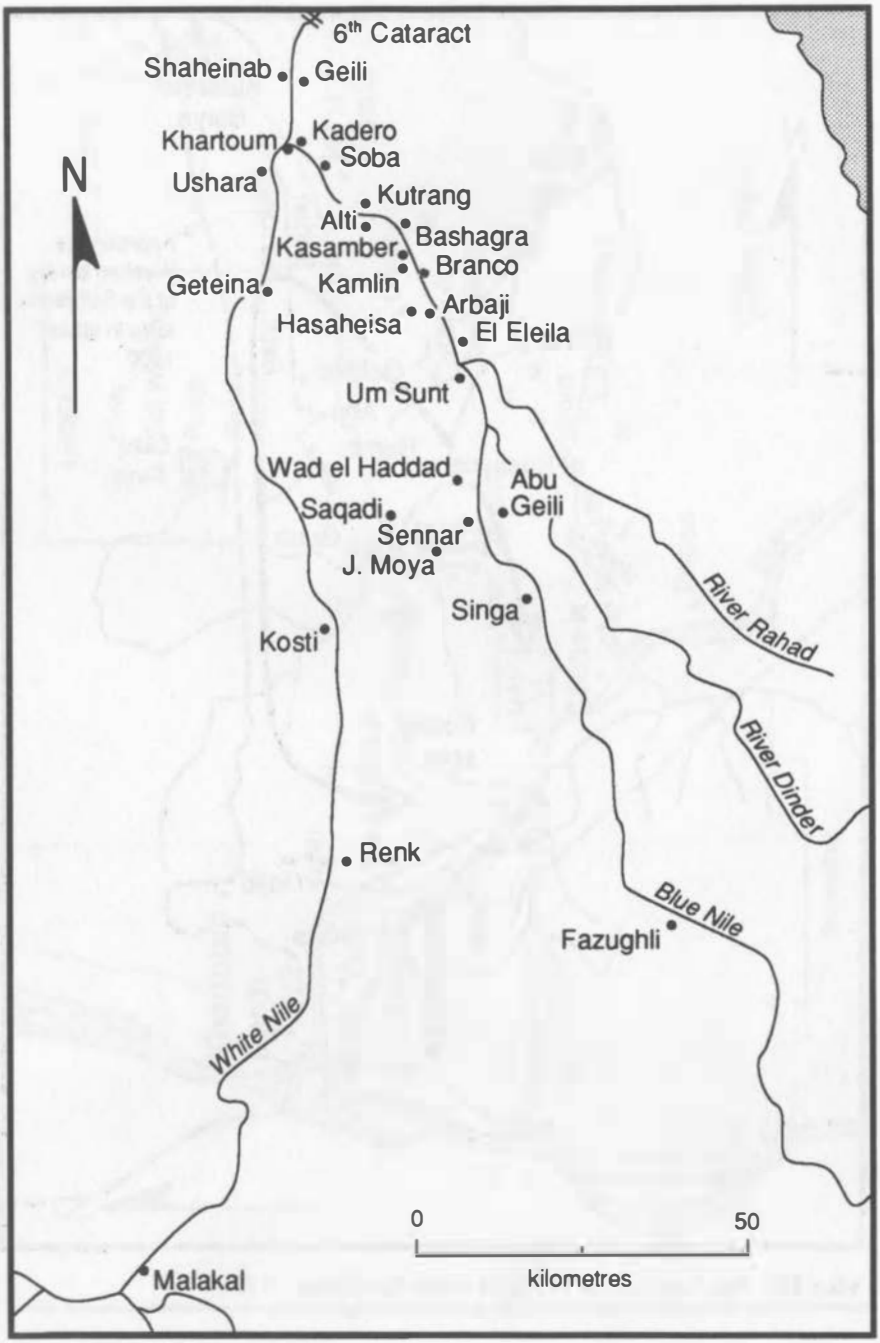
Map I: The Gezira, Butana, Bayuda.



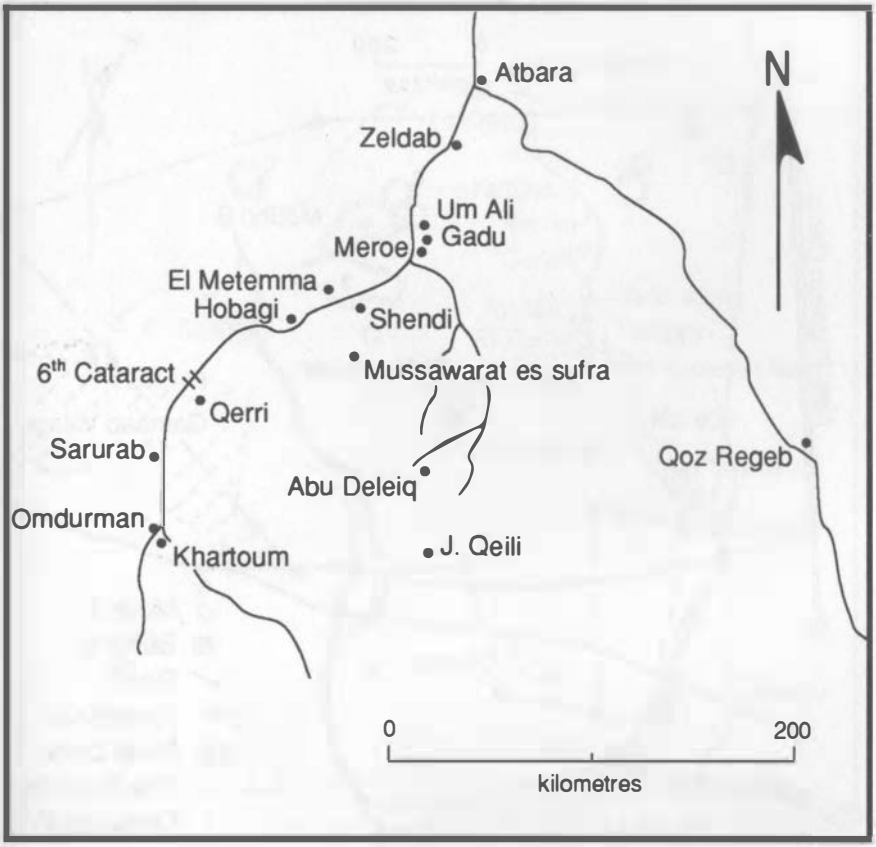
Map II: The area around Soba.



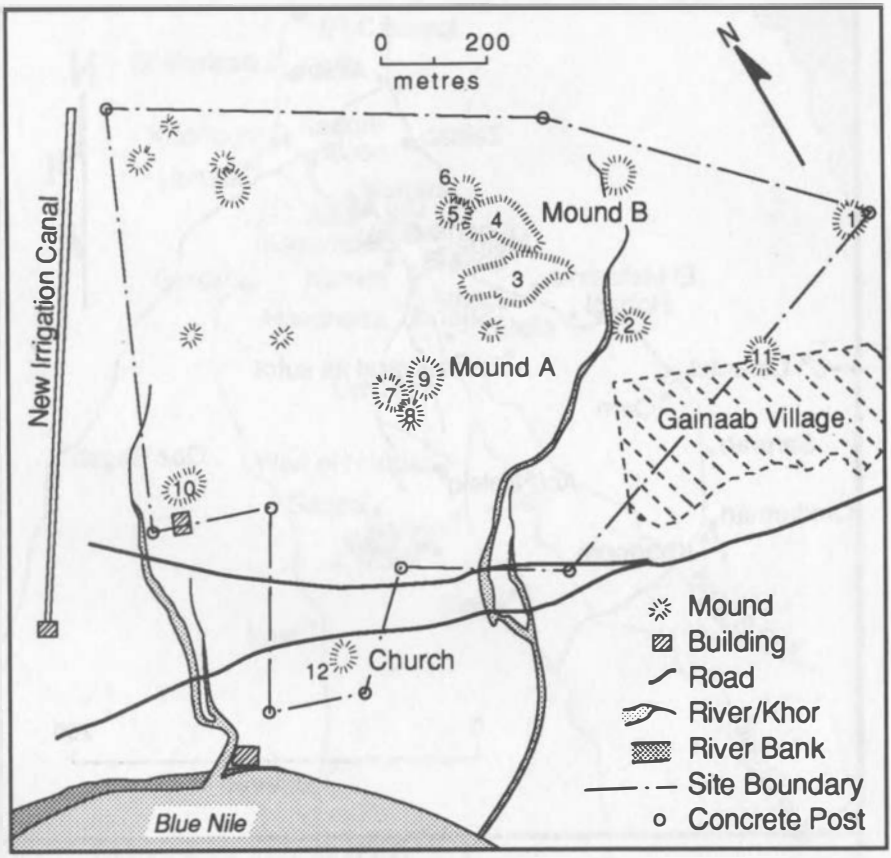
Map III: The Kingdom of Fazughli (after Spaulding, 1974).



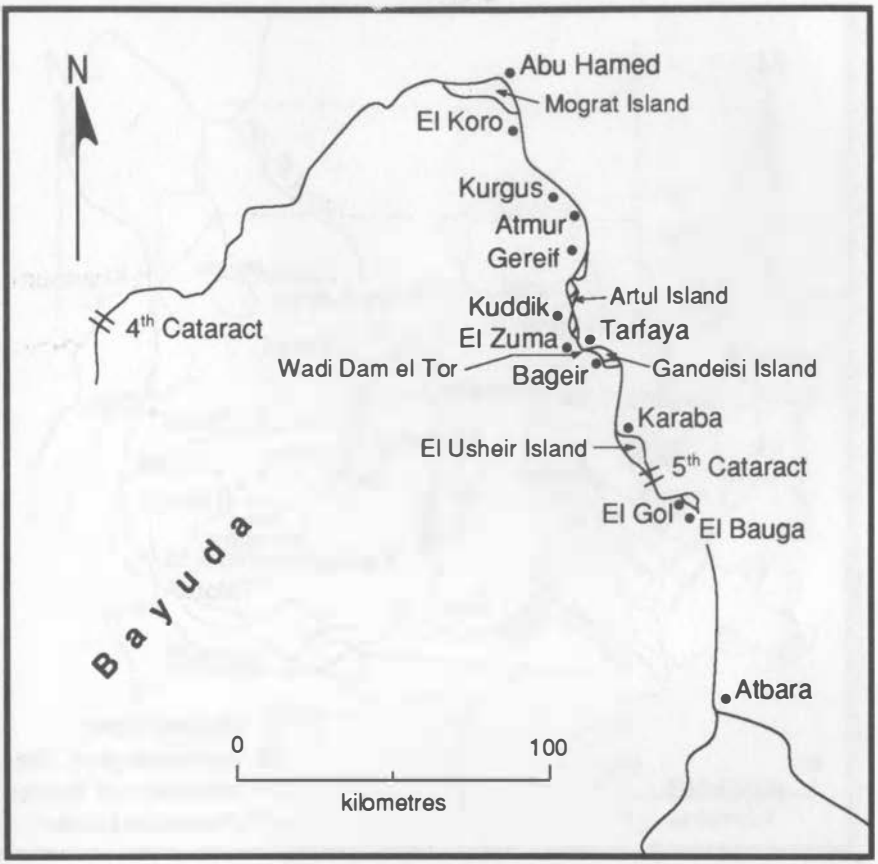
Map IV: Sites in the Gezira Region.



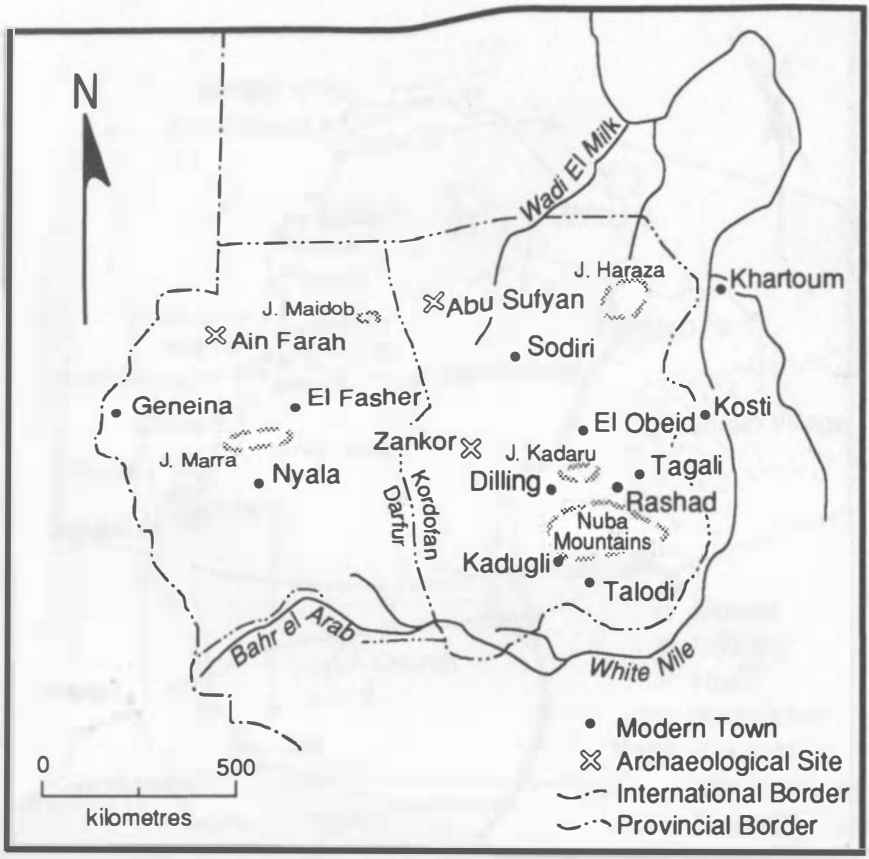
Map V: Sites in the Butana Region.



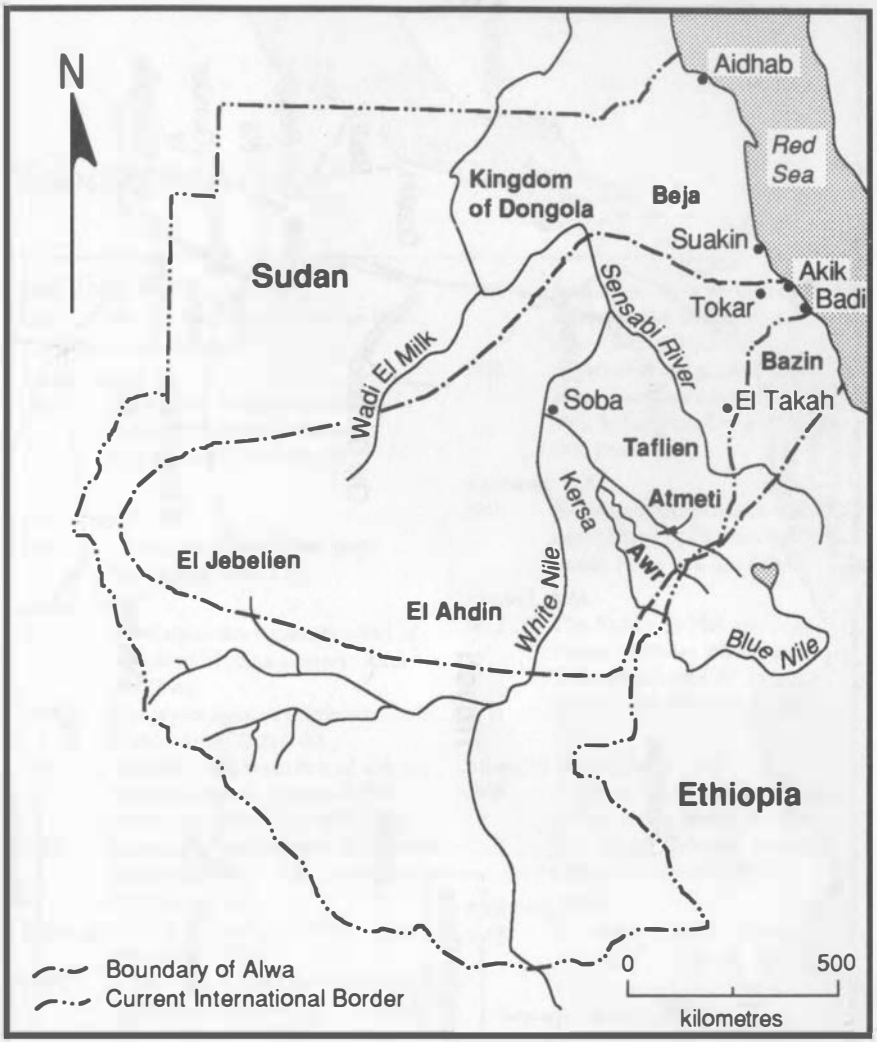
Map VI. Soba (after Shinnie, 1954; see Map II for location).



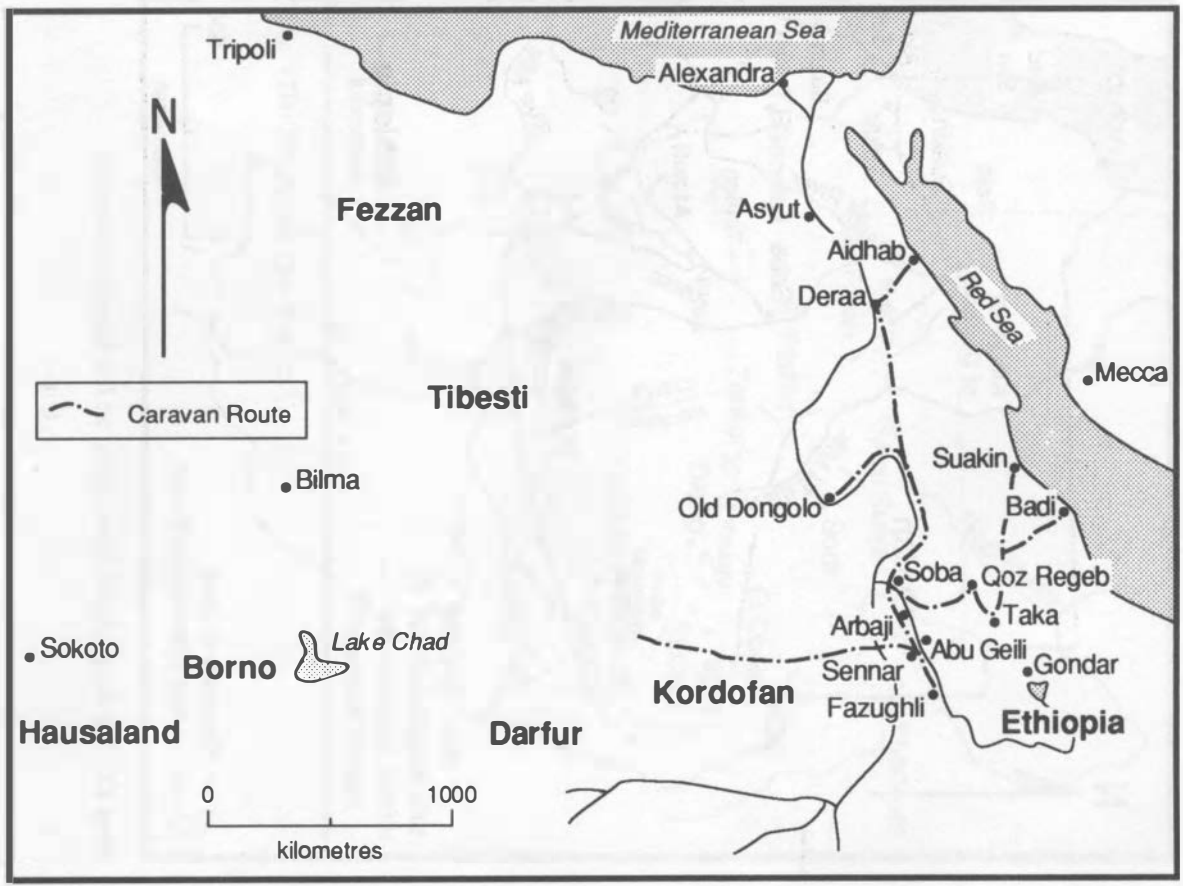
Map VII: Sites in the Middle Nile Region (after Crawford, 1953).



Map VIII: Sites in the Qoz Region.



Map IX: The Kingdom of Alwa (based on Ibn Hawqal's account).



Map X: Caravan Routes.

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